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Between Biblical Criticism and Poetic Rewriting

Interpretative Struggles over Genesis 32:22–32

By

Samuel Tongue



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This book is dedicated to the memory of Margaret Donaldson.

(1952–2012)



And he rose up that night, and took his two wives, and his two womenservants, and his eleven sons, and passed over the ford Jabbok. And he took them, and sent them over the brook, and sent over that he had. And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day. And when he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was out of joint, as he wrestled with him. And he said, Let me go, for the day breaketh. And he said, I will not let thee go, except thou bless me. And he said unto him, What is thy name? And he said, Jacob. And he said, Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed. And Jacob asked him, and said, Tell me, I pray thee, thy name. And he said, Wherefore is it that thou dost ask after my name? And he blessed him there. And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved. And as he passed over Peniel the sun rose upon him, and he halted upon his thigh. Therefore the children of Israel eat not of the sinew which shrank, which is upon the hollow of the thigh, unto this day: because he touched the hollow of Jacob's thigh in the sinew that shrank.

Genesis 32:22–32 King James Version



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“But I don’t want to go among mad people,” Alice remarked.

“Oh, you can’t help that,” said the Cat: “We’re all mad here. I’m mad. You’re mad.”

“How do you know I’m mad?” said Alice.

“You must be,” said the Cat, “or you wouldn’t have come here.”

Some sections of this book have been published in an earlier form. I am grateful to the following publications for providing a forum for my work.

A number of the issues in chapter one were first explored in ‘Dancing between the Disciplines: The Mobile Bible’ in *Testing the Boundaries: Self, Faith, Interpretation and Changing Trends in Religious Studies*, edited by Patricia ‘Iolana and Samuel Tongue (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011). Chapter five builds on work that initially appeared as ‘Scripted Bodies: Reading the Spectacle of Jacob Wrestling the Angel’ in the *Journal of Men, Masculinities and Spirituality* 6, no. 1 (January 2012). My conclusion is also reconstructed from two forthcoming articles: ‘The End of Biblical Interpretation; the Beginning of Reception History? Reading in the ‘Spaces of Literature’, in *What is Reception History?* edited by William John Lyons and Emma England (London & New York: Continuum) and ‘What is Language but a Sound We Christen? Poetic Retellings as an Improper Surprise for Biblical Reception History’ in *Biblical Interpretation* (forthcoming, May 2014).

Definitions/Abbreviations

<i>AAR</i>	American Academy of Religion
<i>BHS</i>	Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia
<i>JB</i>	Jerusalem Bible
<i>KJB</i>	King James Bible
<i>KJV</i>	King James Version
<i>MT</i>	Masoretic Text
<i>NRSV</i>	New Revised Standard Version
<i>OED</i>	Oxford English Dictionary
<i>SBL</i>	Society of Biblical Literature

Bound to Retell

This work is haunted by religion. And yet, ‘religion’ or theology only enters through the intertextual, porous nature of writing and I do not specifically engage with either. However, my argument throughout is broadly and inescapably ‘religious’ due to the etymologies of the word. Part of the dilemma of studying religion and texts embedded in religious discourse, is in the word itself:

In what sense is religion a kind of *binding* (from the Latin, *religāre*), a being bound to a web of principles, doctrines, certainties, and in what sense is it a *process of reading again*, as Cicero suggested (*relegĕre*, ‘to read over again [and again]’), a continuing engagement with texts, a way of articulating, by reading/writing, the most profound questions about life and death, identity and otherness? Is religion about asserting answers or crafting questions?¹

By situating the Bible as a canonical text in what Michel de Certeau calls a ‘scriptural economy,’² I argue that biblical interpretation proceeds by culturally constructed and critically legitimized retellings. The paradox of a Bible that can be deconstructed and yet still survive, still live on, is brought about by writers and critics who are ‘bound to retell’ in this broad sense of ‘religious’ reading and rewriting. An understanding of this paradox offers “a study of the dynamic interaction between the lives of texts and the societies that receive, read, interpret, and use them.”³

I will argue that one of the most dynamic interactions between writer and biblical text is through the phenomenon of *poetic* retelling. This must be taken further than simply listing poems that allude to biblical material; retelling and

1 Timothy K. Beal, “Opening: Cracking the Binding,” in *Reading Bibles, Writing Bodies: Identity and the Book*, ed. Timothy K. Beal and David M. Gunn (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 1.

2 For de Certeau, this scriptural economy functions as the “multiform and murmuring activity of producing a text and producing society as a text.” Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 134.

3 Eric Repphun et al., “Beyond Christianity, the Bible, and the Text: Urgent Tasks and New Orientations for Reception History,” *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception* 1, no. 1 (2011): p. 3.

rewriting are acts with consequences and I examine how the process of retelling is attuned to a number of important questions. The poetic rewriter stands at a busy intertextual junction where “*metaphora* circulates in the city, [conveying] us like its inhabitants, along all sorts of passages, with intersections, red lights, one-way streets, crossroads or crossings, patrolled zones and speed limits.”⁴ In order to traverse the space of the text, of writing, the poet as rewriter has to negotiate these narrow passages, intersections and red lights to make (*poesis*) a meaningful retelling.

However, because I am positioning poetic retellings as legitimate exegetical, eisegetical, and intergetical performances, culminating in what I shall define as *poetic paragesis*, I am situating them in relation to the particular contingencies of contemporary biblical studies. Although the field is now criss-crossed with alternative routes (to which a scan of the SBL’s Annual Meeting Programme will attest), the pre-eminent model remains scholarship collected under an umbrella term—the ‘historical-critical method’. Broadly speaking, this is “the attempt to retrieve the original meanings of the biblical texts (authorial intentions objectified in textual features).”⁵ Because this approach is bound to a critical and narrative *realism* (even if it is also built on a hardwired suspicion of the biblical text’s claim to being ‘real’ history), the epistemological framework in operation is one of reasonable delineations of possible (original) meanings to the text. With the correct methodology in place, questions of how “to comprehend the ways that discourse conditions the apparent ‘subject’ of discourse, the ‘objects’ of discourse, and the ‘exchanges’ of discourse”⁶ can be sidestepped or ignored.

In my work, the poetic paragesis highlights the ‘made’ nature of interpretative acts. These act-events occur within discourses into which the writer, whether critic or poet, is inscribed and bound. As such, because of the constitution of biblical studies, the poet’s use of the *metaphorai* eventually takes her outside the city on a one-way ticket from the centre where correct critical epis-

4 Jacques Derrida, “The *Retrait* of Metaphor,” in *The Derrida Reader: Writing Performances*, ed. Julian Wolfreys (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), p. 102. De Certeau also highlights that, in modern Athens, “the vehicles of mass transportation are *metaphorai*... stories should also take this noble name: every day they traverse and organise places; they select and link them together; they make sentences and itineraries out of them. They are spatial trajectories.” De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 115.

5 Stephen D. Moore, *Literary Criticism and the Gospels: The Theoretical Challenge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 174.

6 David Jobling, Tina Pippin, and Ronald Schleifer, “Introduction: A Short Course in Postmodernism for Bible Readers,” in *The Postmodern Bible Reader*, ed. David Jobling, Tina Pippin, and Ronald Schleifer (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), p. 11.

temologies are produced. The long-running feud between poetry and philosophy, encapsulated in Plato's castigation of poets as mere imitators whose works "are at the third remove from that which is and are easily produced without knowledge of the truth (since they are only images and not things as they are)",⁷ is repeated in the citadels and archives of biblical studies. As Derrida outlines, "such is the situation of writing within the history of metaphysics: a debased, lateralized, repressed, displaced theme, yet exercising a permanent and obsessive pressure from the place where it remains held in check. A feared writing must be cancelled because it erases the presence of the self-same [*propre*] within speech [...]."⁸ Although Derrida is not specifically talking of poetry here, certain forms of poetic language encapsulate this fear of writing as excessive and improper. These are the historical and epistemological precedents into which the paragesis is bound and which require unpicking in order to examine how they continue to operate in biblical studies.

My argument for an understanding of poetic retellings as productive paragesis circles ten lines of biblical text: Genesis 32:22–32 or 'Jacob's struggle with the Angel'. How is it possible to build so much on such a small fragment?

Raising Dust: Why choose Jacob and the Angel?

In Rabbi Shlomo Itzhaki's (or Rashi's) commentary on *Bereshit* (Genesis) 32:25, he notes that the unusual verb 'to wrestle' (וִיאָבֵק) might be derived from אָבַק (dust), indicating that the struggling pair in the famous scene were raising dust with their feet. However, Rashi prefers to pick up the resonances he finds with an Aramaic expression from Sanhedrin 63b of the Talmud. He believes that this verb means that Jacob attached himself: "'After they became attached' (דִּאֲבִיקוּ) 'and he would tie it' (וְאֲבִיק לִיה מִיבָק) for so is the habit of two people who make strong efforts to throw each other down, that one embraces the other and attaches himself to him with his arms."⁹

I have been attracted to this story as an exemplary text that raises dust, obscuring the scene, provoking many commentators to try and interpret what is going on before the dust settles again. At the same time, such interpretations are bound to the text, embracing it, attached even when attempting to exert a

7 Plato, "Republic," in *Classics of Moral and Political Theory*, ed. Michael L. Morgan (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 2001), p. 177.

8 Jacques Derrida, "The Originary Metaphor," p. 88.

9 Chabad.org. "Bereishit-Genesis-Chapter 32" in The Complete Jewish Bible with Rashi Commentary. www.chabad.org/library/bible_cdo/aid/8227/showrashi/true. Accessed January 16th 2012.

critical throw-down and match-winning pin to the mat. As such, it allows multidimensional entry points into biblical studies, literary theory, and poetics and, due to its productive ambiguities, “it raises all the main questions which confront an interpreter or reader.”¹⁰ Each critical engagement has to perform some of the aspects I examine in the first three chapters of this present work. Decisions are made as to what type of text one is reading and how best to then respond: is this a piece of folklore, material from an older source, woven into the Genesis narrative by a redactor, a conclusion offered from a historical-critical point of view? Or is this a piece of literary or poetic writing which prompts critics and readers in their own struggle with textual meaning or post-modern poetic rewriting? Or, better, do these views inform and provoke one another, inhabiting one another’s paradigms, keeping the choreographies of creative and critical writing moving?

The cultural afterlives of the struggle between ‘Jacob and the Angel’ are numerous. From the earliest illuminated manuscripts and frescos up to sculptors and artists like Jacob Epstein, Marc Chagall, Gustav Doré, Rembrandt, and Paul Gauguin, to name but a few, many have attempted a depiction of this enigmatic scene. In terms of its appropriation in art history, Suzanne M. Singletary describes how this scene has offered a “theme of transcendence and redemption through struggle”¹¹ which “offered a complexity and elasticity that each artist could make his own,”¹² the biblical material and the artist’s response sustaining one another through the work of art. Some examples depict an embrace rather than combat, Jacob held in the strong arms of an androgynous angel, as in Rembrandt’s *Jakobs Kampf mit dem Engel* (1659). Others, like Gauguin’s *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel* or *Vision After the Sermon* (1888), picture the event as a spectacle, a wrestling match half-seen, performed in front of a crowd returning from church.

In the world of literary criticism, the motif has become a paradigm for the encounter between reader and text and it is this motif in particular that made me seek out the retellings I shall explore in the upcoming chapters. Kevin Hart provides an overview of this story’s ‘otherlife’ in the work of different thinkers:

10 John Rogerson, “Wrestling with the Angel: A Study in Historical and Literary Interpretation,” in *Hermeneutics, the Bible and Literary Criticism*, ed. Ann Loades and Michael McLain (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1992), p. 131.

11 Suzanne M. Singletary, “Jacob Wrestling with the Angel: A Theme in Symbolist Art,” *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 32, nos. 3 & 4 (Spring-Summer 2004): p. 298.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 299.

Perhaps literary critics have recognized their activity in the story of Jacob more than in any other single biblical tale. Roland Barthes sees a story of textual criticism, how an underhanded blow makes a work into a text. Harold Bloom recognizes agonistic criticism, a struggle between strong poem and strong reader in which one gains one's proper name by an ironic swerve from one's opponent then confirms that name by transumption. Maurice Blanchot finds in the story the very dialectic between solitude and otherness that motivates his criticism. When, after leaving Peniel, Jacob sees Esau, it is his brother's human presence that moves him: 'this other Presence is Other, no less inaccessible, separated and distant than the Invisible himself... Who sees God is in danger of dying. Who encounters the Other can only relate to him by mortal violence or by the gift of the word in his welcome.' Similarly, Geoffrey Hartman reads the tale as a struggle between Scripture and literature; it is a 'struggle for the text—for a supreme fiction or authoritative account stripped of inessentials, of all diversions'.¹³

What keeps biblical critics and literary rewriters returning again and again to this text? With an eye on the etymology of religion, how and why are they bound to retell? And what might this mean for how we perceive biblical interpretation to operate?

With these questions in mind, in order to argue for poetic retellings as hermeneutically viable interventions within the institution of biblical studies, I must cover a lot of interdisciplinary ground. If we are to explore the made nature of interpretative acts, from what are they made? A brief road map for the *metaphorai* is in order.

The Argument Summarized

Chapter One

This opening chapter lays the foundations for how different types of biblical authority were constructed in relation to the Enlightenment-Romantic paradigms that characterized the intellectual currents of late seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe. As the unquestioned theological authority of the Bible waned through the new critical questions being put to it, so new

13 Kevin Hart, "The Poetics of the Negative," in *Reading the Text: Biblical Criticism and Literary Theory*, ed. Stephen Prickett (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), pp. 329–30. Hart is quoting and translating from Maurice Blanchot 'Etre Juif', in *L'Entretien infini* (Paris 1969): p. 189.

inventions of authority were needed to buttress the centrality of this particular text.

Utilizing the work of Jonathan Sheehan in particular, I examine how the Bible-as-historical document ('historical-critical' Bible) and the Bible-as-literature ('poetic' Bible) paradigms are constructed. The rise of the biblical critic, with his focus on corruption and error in biblical narratives, begins to surround the texts with a protective shell of demanding scholarship. Commentary becomes part of the critical business. At the same time, certain biblical texts are imbued with an *aesthetic* authority through eighteenth century notions of the classical sublime. I argue that it is in the work of critics such as Robert Lowth and Johann Gottfried Herder that we find the wellsprings from which these two streams flow, influences which become more and more divergent as Enlightenment and modernist epistemologies form and harden. Lowth in particular exerts much influence over the Romantics and my particular focus on Samuel Taylor Coleridge positions the latter as a poet-critic in whom these Enlightenment-Romantic ideas and persuasions coalesce. I take his theory of participative 'esemplastic' imagination in biblical interpretation, with much qualification, into the main body of the argument. The inventive imagination becomes seen as a double-edged phenomenon, both sublimely or even divinely human (as in William Blake's work) and dangerously excessive for gentlemanly society and its structures.

From this chapter, we gain a sense that, from these beginnings, reading the Bible is an ongoing project in meaning making and a "key site where foundational but unsustainable 'modern' separations were made—and decompose."¹⁴ 'Bible' as an ideal is in constant movement depending on the needs of the reader and rewriter. It is in deciding at what point to arrest this movement between the 'poetic Bible' and the 'historical-critical Bible' that conflict arises in the (post)modern Academy. These tensions animate my theory of poetic paragesis.

Chapter Two

Chapter Two brings these types of Bible into dialogue with certain forms of critical theory and biblical studies in the ongoing debates surrounding the difficulties of deciding on objective historical referents in a biblical text. Rather than simply setting up the 'historical-critical' as a strawman, I question how

14 Stephen D. Moore and Yvonne Sherwood, "Biblical Studies 'after' Theory: Onwards Towards the Past; Part Three: Theory in the First and Second Waves," *Biblical Interpretation* 18, no. 3 (2010): p. 222.

biblical critics deploy the terms 'historical' and 'literary' and what they might mean in this particular critical discourse. For example, when a scholar like John Barton asserts that biblical criticism has been 'literary' all along, I take this as an opportunity to allow Jacques Derrida's conception of the 'anguish of writing'¹⁵ to enter the discussion. Where this 'anguish' has been barely theorized in biblical studies, I argue that it is the *pharmakon* of writing that causes creative tensions in consigning sense and reference to biblical texts caught up in textually obsessed cultures. Poetic retellings are particularly well-placed to perform some of the promise and poison of language's relationship with truth-telling. The historian of science, Steven Shapin, outlines the notion of 'epistemological decorum' in the process of legitimating knowledge and I highlight how this continues to be a prominent way in which a consensus on 'truth' is reached within different disciplinary constitutions, and especially within biblical studies.

After exploring what is meant by the 'literary' in biblical studies, I then turn my attention to the implications of the term 'history'. Michel de Certeau has written extensively on historiography, demonstrating that, when the term 'history' is deployed, what is often involved is a decision on the nature of *l'écriture*, echoing, as it does, the homologies of "literature, Scripture, and history."¹⁶ Deciding on the point of rupture between past and present then involves deciding on an *écriture* that is imagined as historical and yet is embedded in the operations of literature. As such, I emphasize the point that, in another interdisciplinary turn, it is only through a certain type of 'literary realism' that biblical criticism becomes possible.

This leads into an account of the paradigmatic debate between George Aichele, Peter Miscall, and Richard Walsh (on one side) and John van Seters (on the other) that encapsulates these tensions. Van Seters concludes that much postmodern scholarship treats "the final form of the text in a completely fanciful manner without any concern for its historical context."¹⁷ He

15 As Derrida writes, this anguish is brought on by "the necessarily restricted passageway of speech against which all possible meanings push each other, preventing each other's emergence . . . calling upon each other, provoking each other . . . in a kind of autonomous overassemblage of meanings . . ." Jacques Derrida, "Force and Signification," in *Writing and Difference* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 8.

16 Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. xx.

17 John van Seters, "A Response to G. Aichele, P. Miscall and R. Walsh, 'An Elephant in the Room: Historical-Critical and Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible', *The Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 9, no. 26 (2009): p. 6.

then charges Aichele, Miscall, and Walsh with the unmentionable in biblical criticism—"One could, in fact, characterize such efforts as pre-critical and homiletical, having much more in common with religious exegesis."¹⁸ However, in light of the etymology of 'religious' reading, this charge leads me into making my central argument: that all poets and critics are 'bound to retell' these texts in different, yet profoundly interlinked, ways. This work is concerned with testing the bindings that hold poets and critics within the texts they are writing on.

Chapter Three

Having traced some of the genealogies of the debate between how different paradigms of 'Bible' are created through different types of signifying practices, this chapter explores my contention that a *poetic paragesis* offers an understanding of how rewriting a biblical text is an interpretative performance.

The situating of the paragesis is especially important. Due to the (at least) double nature of the biblical—in the case of my thinking 'the biblical' as existing between historical document and literary-aesthetic writing—the poet finds herself writing from within a long tradition of appropriation and assimilation of biblical tropes. Because poetry has been exiled from the critical production of knowledge and yet continues to circle a bible that is constituted as a literary artefact, the poet is both wandering, exiled outsider *and* articulating, constructive insider, *at the same time*. This complex position is best thought through Derridean themes of 'hostipitality' where the biblical is both the 'host' and a 'guest' of the retelling.

It is important to foreground that it is *lyric* poetry in particular that I am using in my analysis. Although the essential traits of the lyric are difficult to define, its melding of subject and social world means that lyric poems offer themselves as types of interpretative reading and writing reports on Gen. 32:22–32. Whilst trying to avoid simply reducing the singularity of a piece of writing to support an analytical model, I also explore how poetry and literary theory move closer together in their shared emphasis on how language builds into meaning and signification problematizing more 'realist' modes of literary production.

This inherence of the Bible and its extra-biblical writing enables me to argue that a paragesis (whether a poetic *or* critical performance) partakes of the inside/outside in biblical studies. With my particular focus on poetic retelling, this interpretative mode troubles the way in which interpretation and exegesis

¹⁸ Ibid.

are performed on bibles, whilst also participating in an intergenesis, producing a writing that feeds *from* the biblical material. The pharmakon of writing now takes on the new name *paragesis*.

Maintaining that a poetic paragesis is constructed from the constitutional elements of biblical studies, I then turn to how the inventive and participative imagination is *disciplined* through critical methodologies in all senses of the word. However, in unpacking the second half of my neologism, *para-gesis*, I argue that it is actually through close critical reading that the spectre of more writing enters the scene. I use Gary A. Phillip's work on 'intergenesis' that positions "the act of rewriting or inserting texts within some more or less established network [for] [m]eaning does not lie 'inside' texts but rather in the space 'between' texts."¹⁹ With this, I demonstrate that the paragesis insinuates itself as a mobile reading position that feeds from many sources, offering an interpretative space between texts, living on the lines of communication between texts. Signifiers circle; the decisions of paragetical reading pull them into alignment, if only for as long as the event of a singular reading takes place. A poetic paragesis is a more overt way of performing this alignment; I will argue that a more critical mode of writing also participates in the act of writerly performance.

Chapter Four

In this section, I continue to explore the complex positioning of the Bible across different reading cultures. Here, the key lines of enquiry follow Robert Alter's concept of the double-canoncity of the Bible, caught as it is between literary and religious reading practices. I argue that poetic parageses animate and exist within the interstices of both canons, effectively ensuring that the poet, traditionally excluded from the production of critical knowledge, actually participates in keeping the undecideability of texts on the move and living on.

In order to situate the poetic retellings that I have chosen to illustrate my thesis, I outline some of the ways in which the ambiguities inherent in Gen. 32:22–32 have provoked commentators to attempt to ascribe meaning, particularly to the problematic identity of Jacob's antagonist. This outline of the text's cultural history allows me to argue that the participative imagination of different writers and thinkers contributes to the text's diffuse meanings, without

19 George Aichele and Gary A. Phillips, "Introduction: Exegesis, Eisegesis, Intergesis," *Semeia*, no. 69/70 (1995): p. 14.

falling into the trap of ascribing a transhistorical meaning that survives embedded in the text.

With this analysis in mind, I then discuss how 'canon' becomes an imaginary ideal authority, its accessibility policed by certain disciplinary frameworks and deployed in certain ways by the first of my poets, Alden Nowlan, Yehuda Amichai and Jamie Wasserman, all of whom rewrite Jacob's struggle with the 'angel' in fascinating and provocative ways. 'Canon' has always been more an ideological project than a neutral collecting and archiving of material texts.

Once I have explored three poems from these writers, I am in a position to argue that ideal double-canon is an intrinsic part of how a poetic paragesis works; in fact, I use another neologism—*canonography*—in order to underline the fact that the ideological operation of the Jewish and Christian biblical canons affects the poets' work, particularly around questions of authority and revision. The 'canon' and the 'extra—' or 'para—' canonical become key parts of the act of writing their own poetic constructions.

This leads me into an extension of my theory of poetic paragesis. Utilizing Derek Attridge's analysis of the literary act-event, I demonstrate how poetic parageses are *acts* of rewriting that are enacted within a scriptural economy. As Attridge argues,

literary texts . . . are acts of writing that call forth acts of reading: though in saying this, it is important to remain aware of the polysemy of the term *act*: as both 'serious' performance and 'staged' performance, as a 'proper' doing and an improper or temporary one, as an action, a law governing actions, and a record documenting actions.²⁰

This polysemy at the heart of the word 'act' helps me argue for the performativity of biblical criticism, something highlighted by the particular 'acts' inherent in the paragesis. Alterity, invention, and singularity all mark rewriting within the canonographies of Bible.

Chapter Five

This final chapter links my work on the act-event of paraetical writing to further question the performative 'act' of biblical interpretation, particularly around issues in gender theory and the constitution and performance of mas-

20 Derek Attridge, "Introduction: Derrida and the Questioning of Literature," in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), p. 2.

culinities. I argue that one of the uses of the poetic paragesis is to foreground how biblical interpreters and poets cope differently with the representations of biblical male bodies, what meanings are ascribed to them through interpretation, and thus how meaning is ascribed more generally to contemporary male bodies.

I indicate that poetic parageses can also be characterized as acts of literary intervention, leading to what Mieke Bal calls an 'ethical non-indifference'. This "literary identity helps the difference between the two canons to keep, so to speak, a foot in the door of the closed religious canons."²¹ The 'made' nature of the literary retelling forces the critic to focus on how masculine identities are performed and deconstructed through a visual/textual nexus that utilizes patriarchal and authoritative texts in its constitution.

In the Genesis story, the Hebrew connotations of Jacob's wounding on the 'thigh' underline the paradox of a fragile patriarchy that poetic rewritings are able to foreground more successfully, I argue, than traditional biblical commentary. Poems from Michael Schmidt, Michael Symmons Roberts, and David Kinloch are read in order to explore the encultured invisibility of divine and human male bodies and the 'religious' refusal to read such a performative scene in interpretation. The nuances brought forth by a multi-dimensional paragesis, circling problems associated with the concept of the 'male gaze', highlight the fictive reality of Jacob's body as a contested site of signification and emphasizes that it is the reader and rewriter who have to decide how to delineate meaning in this act-event.

If the Bible has often been cited as foundational in how we imagine gender roles and possibilities throughout 'western' history, the poetic paragesis demonstrates how these roles and identities are built on shaky ground. The chapter concludes with the suggestion that, through poetic parageses which write the scene otherwise, readers of the Bible might have to admit to the many blind-spots in our figurations of masculinities, tracking the traces of male bodily representation which are also always a supplementation for the absence of an essentialized manhood.

Conclusions

My conclusions indicate future routes for the *metaphorai* to take. Having reviewed how poetic parageses enact a performative interpretation that

21 Mieke Bal, "Religious Canon and Literary Identity," in *Literary Canons and Religious Identity*, ed. Erik Borgman, Bart Philipsen, and Lea Verstricht (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), p. 26.

problematizes how biblical criticism often proceeds, I extend this analysis into contemporary work being done on 'Reception Histories'. Biblical production and reception sustain one another in forms that offer themselves up for cultural analysis and commentary and thus engender a wider debate between Bible and religion scholars and scholars in other disciplines. The debate that I explore here is the notion of purely secular biblical criticism. In arguing for such, Jacques Berlinerblau offers the intriguing definition that interpretation should become a type of jazz. He calls for

an end to interpretation as typically practiced by biblical scholars. In light of the compositional history (and posthistory) of the Hebrew Bible, there is no compelling reason to believe that we can identify what any given editor or writer wanted to communicate to posterity. Conversely, secular hermeneutics endorses interpretation that self-consciously aspires to achieve the status of a work of art.²²

My account of some of the reception history of Gen. 32:22–32 and my documenting of the different types of 'Bible' that are created during the Enlightenment-Romantic paradigms shows that this 'turn to the aesthetic' already has a long and complex history, often entering the frame as a surrogate for religion. Poetic parageses play between the ethical, aesthetic and critical, between the religious-and-secular, and so are useful in assessing Berlinerblau's claims. My conclusion traces some of the inherent difficulties and opportunities that a paragetical 'turn to literature' might engender beyond the 'secular-religious' binaries that orientate so much of what is deemed 'critical' scholarship in biblical studies.

Herman Meville's poem 'Art' imagines how 'unlike things must meet and mate' in order to create form and meaning, to create art:

In placid hours well-pleased we dream
Of many a brave unbodied scheme.
But form to lend, pulsed life create,
What unlike things must meet and mate:
A flame to melt—a wind to freeze;
Sad patience—joyous energies;
Humility—yet pride and scorn;

22 Jacques Berlinerblau, *The Secular Bible: Why Nonbelievers Must Take Religion Seriously* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 78.

Instinct and study; love and hate;
Audacity—reverence. These must mate,
And fuse with Jacob's mystic heart,
To wrestle with the angel—Art.²³

This book explores how such fusions are resisted and for what reasons, and offers new perspectives on these ongoing wrestling bouts—one of the most protracted being that between critical biblical studies and the 'angel—Art'.

23 Herman Melville, "Art", in John Hollander, ed., *American Poetry: The Nineteenth Century Vol 2: Herman Melville to Stickney; American Indian Poetry; Folk Songs and Spirituals* (The Library of America, 1993).

Dancing Between the Disciplines: Following the Mobile Bible

What are we Reading When we Read ‘The Bible’?

This opening chapter traces how the Bible, as a historically contingent collection of texts, has been thought with, written with, and constituted differently at different times. I aim to demonstrate that these texts are forced to be mobile if they are to survive and live on in whatever comes ‘after’ religion, God, modernism, postmodernism, theory, biblical studies (the list is extensive and the rumours of such concepts being in terminal decline are widespread). This chapter is about imagining and constituting the texts I am reading, acknowledging that the perspectives through which the Bible is viewed influence the expectations and production of meanings from it and with it. This is a relational stance and the boundaries and possibilities of this relationship change over time.

Beginning in the eighteenth century (although the roots of these ideas reach back to Reformation and Renaissance notions of how to constitute the authority of the biblical), the Bible’s authority begins to be imagined in very different ways. Writers from different theological or critical persuasions demonstrate a number of positions. There are the Enlightenment sceptics who see in miracle narratives and mythological tales literary tropes of a bygone age, tales that cannot be taken ‘literally’ in a modern rational paradigm that exercises autonomous free-thinking against ecclesiastical obscurantism. There are Pietists and other believers who see proofs of the reasonableness of (Christian) religion in reading these texts with just such a scientific awareness, as long as it is filtered through theological structures. And, towards the end of the century and into the nineteenth, there are the Romanticists and Idealists who, whilst taking their lead from Enlightenment thinking and asserting the centrality of the human imagination, begin to see this imagination as prophetic and linked with a divine creativity and unfolding of the *Geist* through historical processes.

By allowing these impetuses to unfold in this chapter, I am tracing the roots of how the Bible (or Bibles) is read between the disciplines in the broad field of contemporary biblical studies, arguing that many contentious issues over how the Bible should be critically approached, read, and used, have their heritage in

this Enlightenment-Romantic period. The seemingly antagonist approaches of, for example, historical-critical method (which, to put it crassly for the moment, operates with reading methods that tend to focus on the world *behind* the text), literary method (reading the world *within* the texts), and a postmodern 'method' (reading the worlds *within* and *in front* of the text) overlap and complicate one another. Indeed, the very obsession and designation of 'methods' demonstrates an overtly scientific focus, something that I shall have cause to question in chapter two when this is placed in relation to more 'postmodern' theories of knowledge production. Some ways of reading take all these dimensions into account but must settle their conclusions in one direction or the other. However, in order for a reading to be decided upon, even if only provisionally, it must be held in constant negotiation with the other reading methods that help constitute it as a position. Put simply, these reading methods and signifying practices operate with different ideas and expectations of Bible, brought about by different approaches. As Philip Davies argues in his book *Whose Bible is it Anyway?* (1995), some of these approaches are so different (for example, what he terms as 'confessional' and 'non-confessional' approaches) that they "imply different definitions of the subject matter, and create two different kinds of discourses on biblical matters, and these discourses are so fundamentally divergent as to require and to imply *separate disciplines*."¹

The heritage of this separation can be traced in what Jonathan Sheehan terms 'The Enlightenment Bible', a diverse and broad-ranging project that attempted to recuperate biblical authority during a period of immense change. Theological or overtly 'confessional' interpretative approaches to biblical interpretation gradually held less and less authority. As Sheehan explains, "no longer tied to God's Word, the Enlightenment Bible became authoritative by virtue of its connection and relevance to human morality, aesthetics, and history. Instead of theology, culture would be the new rock atop which the legitimacy of the Bible was built."² The continuing fall-out of the 'Enlightenment Bible' project will animate much of the discussion and analysis below. I stay a while with Davies' thesis because it serves to demonstrate that 'The Bible' does not exist in itself, but is an idea created by the discourse in which it is embedded.

If 'The Bible' does not exist apart from certain theological and ideological manoeuvres, a concept of 'The Bible' (with a definite article and a capital 'B') is problematic. Using the term 'The Bible' does not admit to the fact that there is

1 Philip R. Davies, *Whose Bible is it Anyway?* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), p. 13.

2 Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Oxford and Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. xiv.

no agreed final form of this collection of texts. There is the Tanakh (Torah, Nevi'im, and Ketuvim) which when translated into the Greek Septuagint and altered in places becomes, for Christians, the Old Testament, which they follow with a new additional selection of religious writing, the New Testament. Then there is the fact that every major confession within Christianity has its own Bible, often with similar contents but in different orders, or with different weight placed on (extra-)canonical books. There is also the question of how these collections came into being, the diverse material history of Bibles making it clear that "there is no such thing as the Bible, and there never has been. [...] The Bible is not a thing, but an idea, or rather a constellation of often competing heterogeneous ideas, more or less related to a wide variety of material biblical things."³ Issues also remain around which manuscripts were used in translating a given biblical text, and the editorial choices that are a necessary part of making any translation 'work' within the terms of what is understood as reasonable sense.⁴ Philip Davies argues that there are not even 'versions' of the Bible because there is no 'original' from which they can diverge. As he outlines, "the 'Bible' of theology is not a real bible that anyone can touch, read or give the meaning of; it is some kind of Platonic ideal. As I understand the discipline, biblical studies is about real bibles, not ideal ones."⁵

However, I suggest that, in fact, this quest for 'real bibles' is also tied up with certain critical manoeuvres, begging some questions as to its own ideals. The 'ideal Bible' remains and orientates biblical interpretation profoundly. As

3 Timothy Beal, "Reception History and Beyond: Toward the Cultural History of Scriptures," *Biblical Interpretation* 19, no. 4–5 (2011): p. 368.

4 Davies highlights the example of 1 Sam. 13.1. In the Masoretic text, it can be read 'Saul's age was one when he became king and reigned two years over Israel.' The New International Version makes a guess and translates this line as 'Saul was [thirty] years old when he became king, and he reigned over Israel [forty-]two years.' See Davies, *Whose Bible is it Anyway?* p. 67. In relation to the point about editorial or scribal choices, Brennan Breed makes the important assertion that it was increasing religious authority (within both post-first century Judaism and Christianities) that began the process of thinking about "biblical texts and variant readings in a new way; the birth of the idea of an authoritative version of a biblical text simultaneously created the concept of variant readings. Thus the change occurred in the *theological* world, not the material world. Of course, the theological shift impacted the material world of biblical manuscripts, as scribal groups attempted to 'correct' texts toward a presumed authentic consonantal text." "Nomadology of the Bible: A Processual Approach to Biblical Reception History", *Biblical Reception* 1 (2012): p. 305.

5 Davies, *Whose Bible is it Anyway?* p. 68.

Hans Frei outlines in his work on how eighteenth century biblical commentators understood the “realistic or history-like”⁶ elements of biblical narratives,

some commentators explained the realistic feature by claiming that the stories are reliably or unreliably reported history. Others insisted that they are not, or only incidentally, history and that their real meaning is unconnected with historical reporting. In either case, history or else allegory or myth, *the meaning of the stories was finally something different from the stories or depictions themselves.*⁷

Frei's contention supports my view that, through the histories of interpretation, the real material Bibles which Davies argues constitute the work of biblical studies have always been embedded in different ideals of how to make meaning with them. The ‘platonic’ theological Bible does involve certain ideal and ideological decisions being made over what these texts mean, often separating meaning from the literality of the texts themselves (as historical critics argue against ‘biblical theologies’ that unify disparate material). Part of historical criticism's success has been to show that biblical narratives are far from being unproblematically realist and historically accurate. However, within biblical studies more generally, “there remains an unwillingness to call off the search for the people and the practices of the past altogether, for the possibility exists that the biblical texts may unwittingly reveal glimpses of the historical reality they attempt to re-image by means of their ideologies.”⁸ Searching for such glimpses also involves critical manoeuvres that create ‘ideal’ Bibles, albeit Bibles that are to be distrusted and interrogated in the correct critical fashion.

What I want to suggest is that Davies' sense of a ‘real bible’ is also constituted by an *ideal type* of authority. Whilst not necessarily a theological authority, these Bibles are also created by certain forms of (ideal) reading, writing and recitations collected under the term ‘critical scholarship’. As such, the texts become sites in which to practice and perform authoritative criticism. Without an ideal of authority surrounding the text, there is no justification for critical work to continue. This underlines much of the work pursued to create the different types of authority that construct the ideal ‘Enlightenment Bible’ and this chapter examines how some of these types are created and maintained.

6 Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974), p. 10. Emphasis in original.

7 Ibid., p. 11.

8 Francesca Stavrakopoulou, *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice: Biblical Distortions of Historical Realities* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), p. 2.

With these ideals in mind, a note on my use of terms is in order. Throughout this book, 'Bible', without definite article, signifies the networks of discourse (theological, critical, creative, political, cultural, etc.) that have surrounded and continue to enmesh our conceptions and ideals of Bibles, both as material objects (scrolls, codices, books, that might be shelved or defaced), and as imaginative concepts (what they 'do', how they exert influence and what kind of impact they have on 'cultures'). 'Bible' operates as an archetypal term for the nexus of relations that are exerted on real Bibles and which haunt the backdrop to the discussions on different material bibles. In dialogue with 'Bible' are the specific Bibles that are produced at certain times and which contribute to ideal types of 'Bible'. A Bible is an object that may be bought, opened, and read; 'Bible' is shorthand for the spectres of cultural, theological, and disciplinary authority that haunt the readings of a given Bible.

Davies notes his belief that "ancient authors, their texts, modern readers and academic scholarship are all in need of continual liberation from their own idolatry. And 'the Bible' is one of the greatest idols of modern times."⁹ This chapter might be understood as charting some of the history of these different idolatries, but it also argues that this idolatry is inescapable; in order to read Bibles they must be contained within an ideal sense of 'Bible'. We shall see in specific examples such as the Wertheim Bible and the Berleburger Bible that these 'real bibles' come into being through a need to create an ideal Bible that can survive in an Enlightenment context. As Davies explains, this means that "different bibles lend themselves more readily to certain kinds of readings."¹⁰ And these different ideals or *types* of 'Bible' are created by reading practices that are employed within different epistemological, ontological and aesthetic paradigms.

I shall return to Davies' work in the second chapter where discussions about a necessary interdisciplinarity in poetic retellings are deployed as I continue to argue that the 'ideal' Bible and real Bibles are much more closely linked than Davies' separations between confessional and non-confessional readings might suggest. However, at this point, I want to begin to follow 'Bible' and Bibles as they operate with often contradictory ideals, moving between different disciplines and their reading practices. 'Bible' is far from static and will provoke movements between subject and object, interpreter and text, that will become much more of a dance, one leading, the other following, and vice versa, as we chart the choreographies of reading such a disputed and influential text. This work will underline how a given poetic retelling of Gen. 32:22–32

9 Davies, *Whose Bible is it Anyway?* p. 16.

10 Ibid., p. 71.

becomes a part of the constant movement between how the 'real' and the 'ideal' Bible/bibles are distinguished.

Beginnings of the Enlightenment Bible

This section asks how Bibles are read and created during the eighteenth century in ways that give us a sense of what readerly possibilities were available. How do these possibilities constitute the projects that Jonathan Sheehan collates and designates as the 'Enlightenment Bible'? And how does this process influence what comes after?

An entire historical survey of all the translations produced during what has been termed the 'classical' age of biblical translation¹¹ is beyond the scope of this chapter. Moreover, my focus lies in particular upon the cross-cultural exchanges of the German and English 'Enlightenments' and 'Romanticisms/Idealisms' as scholars and thinkers translate and share influential ideas. Although it is problematic to simply collapse the particularities of each European country's experience under the catch-all term 'Western Enlightenment', these broadly defined developments offer a selective path through some of the passions and predilections of the 'Enlightenment Bible' as different Bibles are produced which gradually move toward a sense of authority not bound within necessarily theological frameworks.

Sheehan provides an analysis that underlines how the maintaining of biblical authority in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries becomes a plural and sometimes contradictory project. He identifies four *types* of Bible that will remain useful to think with throughout the rest of my argument for poetic retellings as legitimate interpretative acts within biblical studies:

In the (*textual*) *philological* Bible, the Bible was made into a document whose study would perfect the practice of criticism. In the *poetic* Bible, it was given authority insofar as it participated in man's literary heritage [...]. In the *pedagogical* Bible, it became significant for its moral content. And the *historical* Bible was designed to make it significant as an

11 This is a period of bible translation seen as emanating from the humanistic scholarship of the Renaissance through to the politico-theological issues of the Reformation. Ilona N. Rashkow uses the term 'English Renaissance Bible' as an archetype consisting of Tyndale's New Testament (1525) and Pentateuch (1530), the Coverdale Bible (1535), the Geneva Bible (1560), the Rheims-Douay Bible (1609), and the King James Version (1611). See Ilona N. Rashkow, "The Renaissance," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Bible and Culture*, ed. John F. A. Sawyer (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2006), p. 54.

archive, as an infinitely variegated library of human customs and origins. And in this historical Bible, the ideal of a familiar text was abandoned for one perpetually in translation.¹²

Sheehan traces each of these elements as growing out of the Protestant Reformation's emphasis on translation and scholarship. For Luther, tying his vernacular translation to philological scholarship was both an attempt to guarantee his Bible's authority and free it from the theological structures of the Roman Catholic Church. Scholarship and criticism were to be used as powerful political and theological tools. However, after the fixing of Luther's translation in 1545, any radical revisionary work on German vernacular translation stopped and, ironically, the very Bible that had been used to call for theological reform and change became accepted as stable bedrock. In this mode, theology still had the deciding vote as to what a particular passage might mean. Interpretation in post-Reformation Lutheran Germany understood that "biblical passages were ultimately explicable only with the reference to a priori dogmatic principles—textual problems demanded not historical but doctrinal solutions."¹³

Bibles in the vernacular were for the faithful, for teaching and preaching; scholars could busy themselves with investigating the biblical texts in Hebrew and Greek. Erasmus's ideal was to translate the New Testament (through his Latin *Paraphrases*, 1517–24) in order "that it might reach 'the farmer, the tailor, the stonemason, prostitutes, pimps, and Turks!'"¹⁴ Luther's bible displayed "the thoroughly German character of the translation, making it a landmark in the development of literary German, not least in vocabulary ('I endeavoured', Luther said, 'to make Moses so German that no one would suspect he was a Jew')." ¹⁵ Both these examples demonstrate some of the ideology of vernacular translation as, in these cases, a kind of nationalistic evangelism, co-opting the biblical texts into the national culture through linguistic manipulation.

However, with such a potent text, there was a concern with right reading, providing marginalia to aid and direct those relatively few who were actually able to read its contents. As David Wright highlights, "the modern study Bible has its closest sixteenth-century counterpart in the French Genevan Bible of 1559 [. . .]."¹⁶ Each book is prefaced by an introduction (entitled an 'Argument') and each chapter is summarized with heavy doctrinal and textual annotations

12 Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture*, p. 217. My emphasis.

13 Ibid., p. 21.

14 David Wright, "The Reformation to 1700," in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Bible*, ed. John Rogerson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), qtd. p. 199.

15 Ibid., qtd. p. 201.

16 Ibid., p. 214.

in the margins. It is also preceded by Robert Estienne's summary of Christian doctrine and John Calvin's 'That Christ is the end of the law'. There are diagrams and folding maps, indexes; some copies have bound within them a collection of metrical psalms, a form of common prayer, and Calvin's Genevan Catechism of 1542.¹⁷ Here one can see that, even when Bible was elevated as the highest authority in Reformation dogmatics (as *sola scriptura*), it was not 'alone', embedded as it was, and always has been, in the tensions that run through confessional and non-confessional biblical studies¹⁸—what do these texts mean? And by whose authority?

As the eighteenth century dawned, things became decidedly turbulent in the business of maintaining biblical authority. Whereas the rise of the historical and natural sciences in the seventeenth century had been seen as broadly harmonising with a theological worldview, the eighteenth century brought with it a gradual divorcing of these disciplines. This would have important consequences for a Bible that was now being forced to answer to new intellectual paradigms which "depended on such momentous developments as the rise of sovereign nation states [...], on the vast increase in the availability of ideas and knowledge brought about by the proliferation of printed books; on deep and subtle changes in how it felt to be a human being in relation to nature, time and God."¹⁹ As the popular narrative of Western Enlightenment goes, the work of scientists such as Isaac Newton had produced a universe controlled

17 Ibid.

18 Perhaps now, in a disseminated postmodern age, it is hard to imagine what *sola scriptura* might have constituted, beyond a politico-theological rhetoric. Does this mean that this text alone is all that one needs for salvation, all other texts being left in the shade, to the outer darkness? The Protestant argument runs that the bible is the lone authority from which true theology proceeds. But then one must read this lonely text. How can one read alone? One can read without anyone else being present and one can read silently, so that one does not even hear the strange otherness of one's own voice—but, as the most over-read, overdetermined text available to us, one can never read Bible alone. This is part of how the cultural bible is performed; the vast majority of those to whom a bible has become available will have preformed ideas as to what a 'bible' is, and how it operates, and, ultimately, the limits of its possible meanings. This is why I cannot see how Philip Davies can make 'non-confessional' communication so lonely and only confessional readings have to admit that they are surrounded by other voices. As he writes "whatever communication may be possible between writer and reader via private reading of the text cannot be censored or controlled by an intervening history of ecclesiastical reading (or readings)." Davies, *Whose Bible is it Anyway?* p. 14. But what of a citational history of control through scholarly intervention? No text is left alone.

19 John Drury, "Introductory Essay," in *Critics of the Bible: 1724–1873*, ed. John Drury (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 7.

and sustained by universal Laws of gravity and mathematical formulae that could be rationally understood and examined; God was the divine author who kept these Laws intact.²⁰

In this climate of order and intelligible cosmology during the mid-eighteenth century, Denis Diderot and his group of *philosophes* were hard at work compiling an alternative archive of human knowledge and experience, the *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, (*Encyclopedia, or a Systematic Dictionary of the Sciences, Arts, and Crafts*, 1751–72); his own extensive entry under ‘Encyclopédie’ opens with the following;

Indeed, the purpose of an encyclopaedia is to collect knowledge disseminated around the globe; to set forth its general system to the men with whom we live, and transmit it to those who will come after us, so that the work of preceding centuries will not become useless to the centuries to come; and so that our offspring, becoming better instructed, will at the same time become more virtuous and happy, and that we should not die without having rendered a service to the human race.²¹

The human project had a destiny to be fulfilled; free-thinking and rational discussion could bring about a revolution from the intellectual and social immaturity enforced by (for Diderot, the Catholic) religion and monarchy. “*Sapere Aude!* [Dare to be wise] Have courage to use your *own* understanding!”²² is the famous cry from Immanuel Kant in 1784, a few years before the French Revolution would divide opinion across continental Europe, Britain and the United States as to the wisdom of violent uprising and the Reign of Terror. The teleological thrust of Enlightenment thinking will come to be questioned by modernists and postmodernists but it is instructive at this point to focus on some of the figures involved in biblical interpretation during this period. How

20 Increasingly, however, more notice is being taken of the fact that Newton, one of the ‘fathers of the age of reason’ and president of the Royal Society from 1703 till his death in 1727, “was himself interested in alchemy, prophecy, gnostic wisdom, and theology (his manuscripts include some 1,300,000 words on biblical subjects, as well as *Observations upon the Prophecies of Daniel, and the Apocalypse of St John*, 1733).” Simon Blackburn, “Isaac Newton,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Simon Blackburn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 250.

21 Denis Diderot, “Encyclopedia,” in *The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d’Alembert Collaborative Translation Project*, (Ann Arbor: Scholarly Publishing Office of the University of Michigan Library, 2002), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.did2222.0000.004>.

22 Immanuel Kant, *An Answer to the Question: ‘What is Enlightenment?’*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 1.

was the authority of Bible to be maintained, even across a diverse range of disciplines and opinions?

New Inventions of Authority: the Rise and Rise of the Enlightenment Bible

Under the influence of Enlightenment ideals, Bibles were increasingly seen as an awkward and unfamiliar collection of texts, not modern or mobile enough to keep up with the best of what was being discussed by contemporary thinkers and scholars. In a Kantian vein, one of the main characteristics of 'modernity' is "the growing apart, and the increasing specialization, of the once-connected spheres of science (empirical knowledge), ethics (the moral realm) and aesthetics (the artistic realm in the broad sense)."²³ These separations will be significant as we move into the second section of this chapter engaging with constellations of Romanticism and their complex theories of imaginative reason. The question at this stage was whether 'Bible' could be defended and perhaps rejuvenated once again as an authority that could answer to the wide ranging scepticisms of the age. It is in these conflicts over 'Bible' that we see the key splits that lead to different *types* of authority as biblical scholars mount defences that, paradoxically, force 'Bible' to move into hitherto untrodden critical territories. At these points of conflict, the biblical texts and 'Bible' as a theological and cultural concept come to be understood differently. What had happened to make the Bible, "the totem of cohesion, into a bone of contention?"²⁴ The elements I wish to emphasize here, and which will take us into a discussion about the ideal types of Bible with which contemporary biblical scholars, literary critics, and cultural theorists are working, are the historical-critical (closely linked with philological criticism) and poetic imaginings of 'Bible'. These different imaginings (or ideals) of the authority of 'Bible' provoke the different responses that we see between the disciplines and are what give 'Bible' such a continuous mobility across the academy and in the wider contexts in which it is approached and used.

The Bible-as-Document: Making Sense of Corruption

For Enlightenment readers, much of the material contained within the covers of their Bibles was now causing consternation. How was it to be understood,

23 John W. Rogerson, "The Modern World," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Bible and Culture*, ed. John F. A. Sawyer (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2006), p. 104.

24 Drury, "Introductory Essay," p. 4.

now that miracles and supernatural elements were to be seen in the light of reason and a sense of the natural historical continuity between present and past? Many of the questions circled the themes of ‘Creation and Salvation’, or, more specifically, on the one hand, the new readings of Genesis through the lens of the natural sciences, and, on the other, the debates around the veracity of the Jesus depicted in the gospels and upon which Christian theology built its salvation narratives. John Locke (1632–1704) had published *The Reasonableness of Christianity* in 1695, defending Jesus as a ‘reasonable’ fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies contending that “Jesus had not originally been designated Son of God, and that this marked a later Hellenized interpretation,”²⁵ and emphasizing strongly the “more human aspects of the figure of the Redeemer.”²⁶ John Toland (1670–1722), Matthew Tindal (1657–1733), and a host of other radical deist writers “asserted that religious claims cannot rest on any external authority of any kind, but must be fully contained by human reason exercised unfettered and without prejudice.”²⁷

The English writer Anthony Collins (1676–1729) stands as an example of the type of scepticism to which defenders of biblical authority would have to respond. An avid book collector and critical reader who supplied books to John Locke,²⁸ Collins published *A Discourse of Free-Thinking* in 1713 that argued that free-thinking arose from the duty to think autonomously about such subjects as “the *Nature and Attributes of the Eternal Being or God; of the Truth and Authority of Books esteem’d Sacred, and of the Sense and Meaning of those Books; or in one word, of Religious Questions.*”²⁹ This free-thinking would not lead necessarily to atheism, especially in England which was not constrained like “ignorant Popish countrys, where Free-Thinking passes for a Crime”³⁰—answering this charge, Collins suggests that “the contemplative Atheist is rare”³¹ and that

25 Ronald Clements, “1700 to the Present,” in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Bible*, ed. John Rogerson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 226.

26 Ibid.

27 Roy A. Harrisville and Walter Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture: Theology and Historical-Critical Method from Spinoza to Käsemann* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 51.

28 John Drury, ed. *Critics of the Bible: 1724–1873* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 21.

29 Anthony Collins, *A Discourse of Free-Thinking Occasion’d by the Rise of a Sect Call’d Free-Thinkers* (London: n.p., 1713), p. 32.

30 Ibid., p. 105.

31 Ibid., p. 104.

"no one denies the existence of God but some idle, unthinking, shallow fellow."³²

Collins's next book, *Discourse of the Grounds and Reason of the Christian Religion* (1724), builds on this free-thinking spirit, blending a literary criticism and historical awareness that questions the theological particularity and authority of Christianity. He argues that

[t]his method of introducing christianity [sic] into the world by building and grounding it on the Old Testament, is agreeable to the common method of introducing *new revelations* (whether real or pretended) or any *changes* in religion, and also to the nature of things. For if we consider the various *revelations*, and *changes* in religion, whereof we have any tolerable history, in their beginning, we shall find them for the most part to be grafted onto some old stock, or founded on some preceding *revelations*, which they were either to supply, or fulfil, or retrieve from corrupt glosses, innovations, and traditions, with which by time they were incumber'd [...].³³

Collins contends that, if one is to use an empirical manner of reading, following the 'common rules of grammar and logick,' one would conclude that Christianity, and its theological and doctrinal structures, are grafted onto the 'Old Testament religion' that preceded it. A key point here, and one that continues to be a driving force for historical-criticism in biblical scholarship, is Collins's understanding that religions and texts *change* through the processes of historical development; a more authentic and reasonable Christianity might come about by a process of retrieval from "corrupt glosses, innovations and traditions, with which by time they were incumber'd."³⁴ For Collins, a figural or typological reading of the Old Testament has become absurd. Looking at the words of Isaiah 8:4 appearing in the context of Matthew 1:22–23,³⁵ Collins argues that "the words, as they stand in ISAIAH, from whom they are suppos'd to be taken, do, in their obvious and literal sense, relate to a *young woman* in

32 Ibid.

33 ———, "Discourse of the Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion (1724), Chapters I, IV, V, VII (less paragraph 4), IX, X (extracted), XI," in *Critics of the Bible: 1724–1873*, ed. John Drury (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 24.

34 Ibid.

35 "All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: 'Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel.'" Matt. 1:22–23.

the days of AHAZ, king of *Judah*, as will appear by considering the context.”³⁶ Scripture cannot act typologically and Collins argues that this sense of ‘prophecy’ is actually a grafting that essentially levels out the particularity of different religions, demonstrating what he conceives of as a universal process of “suppos’d *allegory* or *obscurity* (which indeed reins in all prophesies there ever were, whether Pagan, Jewish, Christian, or Mahometan, that have existed before the events to which they have been referr’d).”³⁷

What this indicates for Collins is the *textuality* of religion. As he notes, exploring the work of “the learned SURENHUSIUS, professor of the *Hebrew* tongue in the *illustrious school of Amsterdam*”³⁸ who has been in conversation with a “Rabbin [sic] well skill’d in the *Talmud*, the *Cabala*, and the *allegorical books* of the Jews,”³⁹ the apostles might have been utilizing a midrashic method in their “*forms of quoting*” from the Old Testament. According to Collins, “the jewish [sic] doctors take a prodigious liberty in quoting the scripture, and give us several instances of it. The last is very remarkable, and made Mr. SURENHUSIUS very angry with the seeming absurdity of the Rabbins. But, says he, ‘when I saw St. PAUL do so too, my anger was appeas’d.’”⁴⁰ This proves to Collins that Christianity is established upon midrashic modes of textual exegesis, the New Testament writers using these ‘rules’ in order to provide a sense of authority and completion through ‘prophecies’ prompted by creative interpretation from the Hebrew scriptures.

For critics such as Collins, these biblical narratives begin to be seen as separate and distanced from a rational and intelligibly sequenced world. The texts are to be understood “within the context of a larger reality—terrestrial, cosmic and historical—rather than reality being understood in terms dictated by a biblical metanarrative into which all additional knowledge was supposed to fit.”⁴¹ However, and this signifies the difficulties in speaking about any single teleology of Enlightenment rationalism, for the Bible’s defenders this type of heterodox thinking actually provided the tools of a more religiously orthodox salvage operation. If one were to remove the accretions that Collins had identified, for example, right-thinking people would see that the Jesus of history was

36 Collins, “Discourse of the Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion (1724), Chapters I, IV, V, VII (less paragraph 4), IX, X (extracted), XI,” p. 27.

37 Ibid., p. 29. Emphasis in original.

38 Ibid., p. 31.

39 Ibid., p. 32.

40 Ibid., p. 33.

41 Jonathan C. P. Birch, “The Road to Reimarus: Origins of the Quest for the Historical Jesus,” in *Holy Land as Homeland? Models for Constructing the Historic Landscapes of Jesus*, ed. Keith Whitelam (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2011): pp. 19–47.

a surprisingly modern and enlightened thinker, who supplied clearly applicable, rational teachings.

An important support for biblical authority thus presented itself. This protection would come from an academic endeavour that would attempt to bolster 'reasonable' theological readings of the Bible—*historical-philological* research on the biblical manuscripts would now provide a protective web of demanding and authoritative scholarship. It is at this point of crisis that we see the rise of the biblical scholar and critic who specializes in philology and microscopic textual analysis in order to trace the developments of the composite meanings within and between the texts, and, perhaps ultimately, obtain a sense of what these texts meant in their original and thus more authentic context.

Protecting the Texts: Scholarly Specialisms as Theological Defence

The manuscripts that underlay both the vernacular and the scholarly translations of the Bible now became documents, fragments that had histories of their own and, if pieced together successfully, might map out lost worlds. Reading these texts meant admitting a gap had opened up between contemporary life and the lives and practices presented within scripture, a chasm that one would need a high level of scholarly acumen to cross. For many of these scholars, "errors were *evidence*, evidence for the various histories of manuscripts whose reconstruction paved the road to an uncorrupted Scripture."⁴² An example of this can be seen in John Mill's publication of a Greek text of the entire New Testament in 1707, expanding John Fell's work of 1675, but underwriting the text with a host of variant readings, collecting around 30,000 errors⁴³ that had entered the text over time in an attempt to "render it impervious to the accusations of the anti-biblical party."⁴⁴ The acknowledgment of errors and the gradual 'cleaning-up' of the text was part of the process of arguing for scriptural stability, allowing readers (but more likely, scholars) to answer the accusations of those who would see the biblical texts crumble under the weight of critical logic. However, it became evident that simply collecting variant textual inconsistencies would not be enough; in order to create a truly stable text, critics would have to decide which variants were the more likely to have been corruptions and which to be closest to the original sense. This could take two forms. For a scholar like Johann Albrecht Bengel, who produced a

⁴² Ibid., p. 105.

⁴³ A fact that Anthony Collins brings up in his *Discourse on Free Thinking* to show the uncertainty of the texts against the orthodoxy of priestly interpretation. See pp. 88–9.

⁴⁴ Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture*, p. 45.

German New Testament in 1753, choosing the more difficult reconstruction of the meaning of the final text was most significant because “the wise textual critic assumes that corruption works to simplify rather than complicate.”⁴⁵ Against this idea, Daniel Whitby’s critical attempts to clear up the uncertainties of Mill’s Greek New Testament consisted of deciding upon the clearest, most rational meaning available from the variants, subordinating the text to a critical architecture that was designed to organize and structure possible meanings.

However, the type of Bible that these critics were helping to create was caught in a double-bind. By demonstrating error and corruption in the underlying manuscripts that made up the biblical texts, an important sense of the historical genealogy of these texts had opened up. In order to decide upon whether to include a textual variant in a translation, one had to judge how closely it shared in or differed from its philological inheritance with other early manuscripts, already judged to be authoritative. For Bengel, this quest for a way back to reconstructing the lost original (and thus more accurate) scripture meant that these manuscripts “came to stand for something beyond their own theological, or even literary, content . . . the manuscripts . . . became pieces of non-literary evidence. They became, in short, documents.”⁴⁶ Bengel still included variant readings in the margins of his Greek New Testament but he graded them, allowing the critic to make an informed choice as to deciding the meaning of a given passage. For Bengel, critical scholarship was to frame this decision rather than theological or dogmatic certainties, although these were not simply to be discounted: “where the radical Pietists were happy to seek the original texts inside their hearts, Bengel insisted on the real thing.”⁴⁷ The text must be substantially reviewed, critiqued, revised and revised again. As Bengel writes in his preface to *Gnomon of the New Testament* (1742):

Writings and commentaries are chiefly available for the following purposes: to preserve, restore, or defend the purity of the *text*; to exhibit the exact *force of the language* employed by any sacred writer; to explain the *circumstances* under which any passage was uttered or written, or to which it refers; to remove *errors* or abuses which have arisen in later times.—The first hearers required none of these things. Now, however, it is the office of commentaries to effect and supply them in some measure, so that *the hearer of to-day, when furnished with their aid, may be in a*

45 Ibid., p. 98.

46 Ibid., p. 101.

47 Ibid., p. 110.

*condition similar to that of the hearer in primeval times who made use of no such assistance.*⁴⁸

However, the critical projects of scholars such as Bengel had engendered an important dichotomy between the biblical manuscripts and 'The Word of God' or, following my line of argument, between 'real bibles' and The Ideal Bible. Bengel could argue for a scheme of Christian salvation built on those biblical books or sections that the critic had decided were original, accurate and sound. Christian theology only needed a few confirmation pieces; the rest of the biblical material was not as important as these kernels of Christian truth around which a Christian theology could be organized. This meant that

[o]n the one side, theology and human salvation were inoculated to the findings of textual critics. The corruption of the biblical texts could not enfeeble the truths of Christianity. On the other side, though, this very inoculation meant that textual critics were free to dismiss theologians anxious to preserve intact the essential Christian truths. No longer did theology have any bearing on the enterprise of philology. Philology was, in essence, free.⁴⁹

This idea of 'Bible' had an authority built, not upon theology or Church doctrine, but on textual scholarship. Historical-philological scholarship as a way of guarding against pre-critical or overly tendentious readings (whether sceptical or 'faithful', confessional or non-confessional) is a continuing theme that defines modern scholarship on 'Bible'. We shall return to this question in chapter two through an analysis of what constitutes the legitimate parameters of contemporary biblical study. At this point, it is important to note that 'Bible' is being re-imagined as a collection of fragmentary documents that are littered with errors; it has become a book of problems, rather than solutions, and is now perpetually on the move.

Having said this, in Germany during this period, the Luther Bible still operated as a centre around which 'versions' augmented this 'original'. The translations offered by critics and scholars constituted a continuing commentary with variant readings, not an all-out replacement of Luther's translation. They were alternatives but not authoritative in the same cultural and theological

48 Johann Albert Bengel, *Gnomon of the New Testament*, ed. Andrew R. Fausset, trans. Andrew R. Fausset and James Bandinel, 5 vols., vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1857), p. 7.

49 Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture*, p. 115.

sense—what these scholars had begun was the founding of a distinctive and often rival sense of *critical* authority.

However, it is in Germany that we see some material Bibles produced that serve as excellent examples of how ideal *types* of Bible are moulded by the influences of the time. According to Dieter Georgi, this period can be seen through

two movements linked in a dialectical relationship—one sentimental and one rationalist . . . Pietism and the Enlightenment. Both grew out of the bourgeoisie and shaped it; both were interested in the self, its illumination, and liberation. Both saw the self as threatened, indeed enslaved by impersonal dogmas and institutions. Both were interested in experience and method.⁵⁰

This dialectic becomes even more pronounced with the move towards Romanticism and Idealism discernible in biblical poet-critics such as Blake and Coleridge, and biblical scholars such as Schleiermacher in the late seventeenth and early to middle eighteenth century. Before I address this later in the chapter, I want to focus on two German bibles that demonstrate the critical tensions between Pietism and Enlightenment and their allied quests for individual autonomy against overarching ecclesiastical authorities.

Adding Notes in the Margin: Pietistic Tools to Open Pandora's Box

In the German duchies of the fading Holy Roman Empire, the particular contingencies of its provincial make-up allowed a flowering of heterodox opinion and publication. One of the tenets of the Westphalian Peace Accords (1648) limited public expression that ran contrary to the three sanctioned churches, Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Calvinist, respectively. However, radical Pietists who resisted such curtailments were often able to obtain sponsorship and protection from noble patrons and authorities within the jurisdiction of their own territories.⁵¹ As Pietism advocated a focus on the individual and their responsibility before God, a 'religion of the heart', coupled with the desire to free Christian worship from the theology of Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Calvinist orthodoxies, the centrality of Scripture was once again pivotal. As George Becker notes, "[a]ccustomed to viewing all endeavour with an eye to

50 Dieter Georgi, "The Interest in Life of Jesus Theology as a Paradigm for the Social History of Biblical Criticism," *The Harvard Theological Review* 85, no. 1 (1992): p. 72.

51 See Paul Spalding, "Noble Patrons and Religious Innovators in 18th-Century Germany: The Case of Johann Lorenz Schmidt," *Church History* 65, no. 3 (1996).

salvation, Pietism was predictably antagonistic to the secularism characteristic of the 18th-century spirit of Enlightenment.”⁵² However, there was also a tacit assumption that devotion would have to be run through a scholarly practice that could buttress belief and piety in a ‘rationalist’ age. Both “Rationalists and Pietists wanted to be ‘practical’ in every respect, even religiously. Doctrinaire theology was despised as much as petty legalism. The goal was a practical piety, an internalizing as well as an ethicizing of religion that would, however, concretely radiate and bring about change for the better.”⁵³ The key notion of biblical authority for the Pietists was to show that, rather than riddled with textual error and the contingencies of their formations, the biblical texts slotted comfortably into the rationalist sciences, histories and philosophies of the period. Two brief examples will suffice here.

Overseen by Pietist scholar Johann Freidrich Haug (with the patronage of Count Casimir of Sayn-Wittgenstein-Berleburg), the Berleburger Bible, published between 1726 and 1742 and extending over numerous volumes, is a mammoth example of how this ideal was attempted. Each page of this Bible demonstrates the multiple impulses the Enlightenment exerted upon it. Slivers of biblical text sit atop vast columns of information, facts, figures, obscure etymology and commentary making the “implicit point that scholarly data *had* to be considered even in the day-to-day vernacular Bible.”⁵⁴ Here the marginal notes, garnered from other disciplinary sources, and passed through Pietist interpretative strategies, were intended to prove the *universal* truths of the biblical narratives. The Pietist impulse was to once again try to free their Bible from preceding theologies through scholarship and wide-ranging study which would buttress the non-denominational, universal and systematized theological truths of the text.

Yet this would come at a cost; as Sheehan highlights, “[b]y moving the Bible beyond the hegemony of theology, Pietists opened it up to the dispersive media of the Enlightenment.”⁵⁵ In attempting a legitimate defence of the Bible against its sceptical interlocutors, the collators of the Berleburger Bible had been caught in an ongoing paradox of this period (and continuing into contemporary rewritings of Bible as we shall see)—as one characterizes and defends Bible’s authority using Enlightenment paradigms, underlining its relevance

52 George Becker, “Pietism’s Confrontation with Enlightenment Rationalism: An Examination of the Relation between Ascetic Protestantism and Science,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 30, no. 2 (1991): p. 145.

53 Georgi, “The Interest in Life of Jesus Theology as a Paradigm for the Social History of Biblical Criticism,” p. 73.

54 Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture*, p. 83.

55 Ibid., p. 85.

and force, it is through these very paradigms that such formulations of authority can also be shown to be suspect. Indeed, this Protestant culture of criticism that had allowed different Bibles to come into existence (although not without risk to those involved) was always double-edged: “from the time of the Reformation, Protestants held the conviction that Roman Catholic Christianity was a false development of primitive Christian faith that distorted the clarity of the gospel. This simple but revolutionary idea—the assertion that the church itself betrayed the divine intention—was like the opening of Pandora’s box.”⁵⁶ Textual criticism and translation, as ways of opening this box, have ensured the unsettled mobility of ‘Bible’ across the disciplines and different media ever since.

Another bible deserves mention in this context. The controversial Wertheim Bible, published by Johann Lorenz Schmidt anonymously in 1735, consisted of a translation of the Pentateuch, again with extensive annotations and commentaries that bore little resemblance to the authorized religious interpretations. Schmidt had not treated the texts as sacred in themselves but had applied to them the rationalist, deductive modes that had been made applicable to other contemporary literature. He had tried to show that the Mosaic books had a context in themselves, without reference to the New Testament. However, what many theologians saw in this vernacular translation was the undermining of a Christian theological understanding by a Deism that no longer allowed for an interventionist God. The story of God’s ongoing activity in the first and second chapters of Genesis became

a scientific description of natural processes, which Schmidt believed to operate according to God’s original, unchangeable plan. For example, Schmidt suggested that the flaming sword of the cherubim (Gen. 3:24) was a lightning storm, and he attributed Moses’ conversion of the Nile’s waters into blood (Exodus 4:9) to an admixture of some natural material that caused the water to redden.⁵⁷

In an effort to render the content of the Bible as congruent with the best of contemporary scientific discovery and rationalism, Schmidt had emphasized scholarship over doctrinal interpretation, yet still within a model that saw reason and revelation as intrinsically compatible.

⁵⁶ Harrisville and Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture: Theology and Historical-Critical Method from Spinoza to Käsemann*, p. 52.

⁵⁷ Spalding, “Noble Patrons and Religious Innovators in 18th-Century Germany: The Case of Johann Lorenz Schmidt,” p. 379.

John Rogerson provides another example related to this drive to rid the Bible of supernaturalism, and one even more pertinent to the focus of this book, when he notes that similar rationalising interpretative treatments of Gen. 32:22–32 held that

Jacob fell asleep by the river, that the cold night air gave him cramp and rheumatism, and that the resulting pain induced the dream as he awoke [. . .]. Another rationalising view . . . is that Jacob's assailant was a robber who misjudged Jacob's strength, and who was only too happy to nurture Jacob's mistaken belief that the opponent was a divine being. Because he was a robber, the assailant refused to disclose his name, and wanted to get away before the sun arose, lest Jacob should discover the truth about him.⁵⁸

The rationalising interpreters are trying to find referents outside the supernatural and strange world of the text through a realism that attempts to affirm the events but not the inner-biblical interpretation. This is the 'principle of analogy', "the principle that nothing should be believed to have happened in the past of a kind which is never experienced in the present—[which] logically presupposes, *somewhere*, a verifiable historical reality."⁵⁹ This is a different tack to scholars such as Bengel who, if theological precepts demanded, could separate the manuscripts that either underwrote *or* undermined the principle of analogy from the final form of the biblical texts. For Schmidt, there is a desire to show that, if read correctly and with the right amount of knowledgeable apparatus surrounding the text, a given reader will be able to translate these scenes from a mythological 'supernatural' framework into a recognisably modern worldview.

What is important here however, and will be seen as chapter two moves into an analysis of our own contemporary studies of 'Bible', is that these new types of authority had again recast the very idea of the Bible, freeing it from the defences of theology and religious structures. The Wertheim and Berleburger Bibles now had to move in the same circles as the popular new dictionaries and encyclopaedias that were being compiled as collections of human knowledge and formulating a newly politico-social theme of human knowledge and investigation as an eminently modern good. Rational choice and freedom from

58 Rogerson, "Wrestling with the Angel: A Study in Historical and Literary Interpretation," pp. 134–5.

59 Stephen Prickett, *Words and The Word: Language, Poetics and Biblical Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 17.

imposed authority were watchwords for a liberal intelligentsia who now wanted religion (if they remained 'religious') to concern itself with this-worldly issues, leading man from his childish immaturity in theological notions such as 'original sin' onward into a future which was open to a humanity come-of-age. Interestingly, Hermann Samuel Reimarus, often seen as a key founder of the historical-critical method of biblical study and, in particular, a forerunner of the 'quest for the historical Jesus', displayed his own ambivalent existential struggles with this new 'Pandora's box' of a Bible. He attacked Schmidt's Wertheim Bible vehemently:

Behind Schmidt's attempt to rationalize scripture, Reimarus saw the ubiquitous influence of the rationalist philosopher Christian Wolff at work. Although Reimarus himself drank deep of the Wolffian method, using it to nourish his own rebellious position, he nevertheless knew the danger of Wolff to Christianity and sought to warn the faithful away. At the same time however, when after the publication of his rationalist Bible Schmidt was hounded by the authorities . . . it was at Reimarus' home in Hamburg that Schmidt found sanctuary.⁶⁰

Although his Bible was quickly banned, Schmidt's attempt to again surround 'Bible' with a new sense of authority offered the dangerous opening that Reimarus had anticipated. Rendering the Genesis text through the guise of naturalist science and thus tying it to the ascendant authority of the time could not be sustained. Using these tools as defence, Schmidt had paradoxically offered another way to break into Pandora's Box, this time by opening it up to an atheist critique on scientific grounds. If the biblical texts were analysed from the perspectives of the increasing knowledge available to those exploring the natural sciences and found wanting, then it was even easier to prove them inaccurate and deeply flawed (a battle that continues to flare up in vocal arguments between 'Creationist' and 'Intelligent Design' proponents and contemporary scientists). Schmidt had continued to dismantle the comparative and typological readings of Genesis by showing that these texts simply could not mean what Christian theologians read into them (just as Anthony Collins had also argued), arguing instead for a rational principle of

60 Harrisville and Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture: Theology and Historical-Critical Method from Spinoza to Käsemann*, p. 55.

analogy and contributing to the ongoing project of trying to create a “new, pure, and authoritative Bible.”⁶¹

These attempts to support biblical authority through new historical and rational architectures had, to a large extent, performed the opposite function. By emphasizing the difficulties of deciding upon meanings for biblical texts without erudite and detailed scholarship, demonstrating the vast gulf between the world of the Bible and contemporary worldviews, the ideal theological Bible had been pulled away from religious authority. What other options were available? How else could ‘Bible’ be imagined? How else could it live on?

The Poetic Bible: Robert Lowth, Johann Gottfried Herder and the Parting of the Streams

Attempting to construct biblical authority on rational and scientific grounds brought with it a demand that biblical texts be tied to a historical realism, whether through the explicit contents of a particular story or, more often, by asserting a more realistic source for the recounted events. For many however, explaining away the more fantastical elements of a biblical account impoverished its powerful imaginative affects. Historical authenticity was still important but there came a move not towards trying to affirm the historical *accuracy* of events but, instead, attempting to connect with the ‘original’ and authentic religious experiences of which the written texts were but markers.

Stephen Prickett explains that “it is no accident that the word ‘aesthetic’ (and to some extent, even the concept itself) dates from the late eighteenth century. In Germany, what was virtually a new subject, ‘aesthetics’, had come into being following Kant’s hint in the third *Critique* that the gap between pure and practical reason might be bridgeable by art, and was to become a central plank of Romanticism.”⁶² This would provide another aspect to rejuvenating biblical authority. But recasting the ideal ‘Bible’ as a ‘poetic’ piece of world literature, as an aesthetic object available to the free play of the imagination is, once more, bound up with cultural-political ideas of what ‘Bible’ is for and how it is to be read. This Bible is created by different theories of ‘Literature’ as an organising concept, and by theories of the imagination that become

61 Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture*, p. 129. But, again, with the anti-Semitic echoes of Erasmus, Spinoza and Luther, Schmidt’s notion of a ‘pure’ Bible was one where the Hebrew idiom had been excised as a key barrier between the Bible and modern reader; the Jewishness of the texts was still evidently a problem for the project he had envisioned. See p. 129ff.

62 Stephen Prickett, “Introduction,” in *The Blackwell Companion to the Bible in English Literature*, ed. Rebecca Lemon, Emma Mason, Jonathan Roberts, and Christopher Rowland (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), p. 314.

increasingly autotelic, “its own means and its own end, the mirror turned lamp.”⁶³ This aesthetic demands that Bibles exhibit a felicitous ‘finality of form’. That is to say, the stories and narratives must correspond to the ‘beautiful’ and ‘sublime’ and be imagined as works of art by prophets and writers who are more akin to poets than to the mere error-ridden scribes that had been characterized by the scholarly creators of the Bible-as-Document. But could this Bible, even if it had been split along scholarly lines between the historical biblical manuscripts and the theological Word of God, become, in Kant’s telling phrase on the aesthetic condition, ‘purposiveness without purpose’?⁶⁴ How could ‘Bible’, now conceived as Bible-as-poetry and aesthetic object, be without authoritative ‘purpose’? Or did this move also signify a renewed sense of purpose in studying ‘Bible’?

Robert Lowth’s Understanding of the Purposes of Sacred Poetry

It is important to note that tracing these types of ‘Bible’ involves acknowledging that the motivations of the readers that create them are complex and multi-layered. I am not arguing for separate ideal Bibles that then exist in isolation from one another; ideal Bibles inform and create one another through their readers’ different emphases and disciplinary identities. Here we confront the type of biblical authority that Sheehan terms the ‘poetic’ or ‘aesthetic’ Bible, an authority in tension with the emphasis on historical-critical scholarship that maintained a focus on the biblical text as in need of retrieval or rational explanation. Where the ‘historical-critical Bible’ seemed to make the Bible into a series of fragmentary foreign documents very much removed from contemporary ‘modern’ worldviews, the influences that go to make up the ‘poetic’ Bible offer a different choreography between biblical authority and readerly freedom.

For a figure like Bishop Robert Lowth the question as to the purpose of poetry was answered thus: “[...] it is the purpose of sacred poetry to form the human mind to the constant habit of true virtue and piety, and to excite the most ardent affections of the soul, in order to direct them to their proper end [...]”⁶⁵ A ‘poetic’ Bible was far from being merely an aesthetic product; an appreciation of its poetic depths and heights would yield a renewed religiosity. Similarities and shared subjectivities between contemporary reader and

63 Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination: Toward a Postmodern Culture* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 172.

64 qtd. Ibid.

65 Robert Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, trans. G. Gregory (London: Elibron Classics, 2005), p. 23.

ancient writer were emphasized, linking the artistry of the biblical writers with contemporaneous views of literature and poetics as the “awful distance that separates us not just from the ancient Hebrews but also from God himself [...] is overcome by human art and human reason.”⁶⁶ Readers were now asking whether the Bible, in translation or in its original languages, also had an aesthetic quality, an authority that exerted itself over the heart as well as the head. Two eighteenth century scholars whose work engenders a sense of a ‘poetic’ Bible are engaged with here; Robert Lowth in England and Johann Gottfried Herder in Germany.

Robert Lowth’s *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, first delivered in Latin in 1741 but only published in English in 1787, serve as an important source for the constructive and creative tensions between the two types of ‘Bible’, historical-critical and poetic, that I am arguing underline differing approaches to the biblical text. For Lowth, both approaches illuminate one another; accessing, understanding and appreciating the sacred poetry evident in many biblical texts, allows the critic and reader to be transported back through time, “to feel them as a Hebrew, hearing or delivering the same words, at the same time, and in the same country.”⁶⁷ In many ways, this desire is akin to the historical-critical method of constructing a ‘sitz im leben’, a situation in life, in order to trace and place the sources of a given biblical text. As Stephen Prickett notes, placing Lowth as a wellspring for both tendencies, “for some, there is an inherent paradox that the century that saw the advent of the Higher Criticism of the Bible, and the consequent questioning of both its historicity and its veracity, was also the century that saw it rise to new heights as an aesthetic model. *This is a paradox present in the very origins of the Higher Criticism itself.*”⁶⁸

Lowth was not reading the scriptures as displaying a fourfold or sevenfold theological code—his focus on the poetics, the literary constructions evident in the texts, served to both emphasize historical distance and difference and, at the same time, to bridge this gap by appealing to a higher sublime poetic authority. As he underlines:

To all who apply themselves to the study of [Hebrew] poetry . . . difficulties and inconveniences must necessarily occur. Not only the antiquity of these writings forms a principal obstruction in many respects; but the

66 Jonathan Sheehan, “The Poetics and Politics of Theodicy,” *Prooftexts*, no. 27 (2007): p. 219.

67 Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, p. 56.

68 Prickett, “Introduction,” pp. 315–16. My emphasis. This paradox is often elided in contemporary biblical criticism. Chapter two reintroduces this paradox as an interpretative tool.

manner of living, of speaking, of thinking, which prevailed in those times, will be found altogether different from our customs and habits. There is, therefore, great danger, lest, viewing them from an improper situation, and rashly estimating all things by our own standard, we form an erroneous judgement.⁶⁹

This warning against error became one of the fundamental laws of the Higher Criticism and Lowth emphasizes that biblical and contemporary worldviews are separated by an extra-biblical history that is the realm of the scholar. However, he also argues that this distance can be overcome through poetry: if “history treats of things and persons which have been in actual existence; the subjects of poetry are infinite and universal.”⁷⁰ With this in mind, how is Lowth contributing to a conception of a ‘poetic’ Bible and what is its purpose?

Lowth, as befits his position as Oxford Professor of Poetry (a position he held from 1741 to 1752), argues for a poetry that shares an epistemological project with philosophy but differs in its journeying towards truth:

The philosopher and the poet, indeed, seem principally to differ in the means by which they pursue the same end [...]. The one proceeds to virtue and truth by the nearest and most compendious ways; the other leads to the same point through certain deflections and deviations, by a winding but pleasanter path. It is the part of the former so to describe and explain these objects, that we must necessarily become acquainted with them; it is the part of the latter so to dress and adorn them, that of our own accord we must love and embrace them.⁷¹

This desire for poetry not to simply ‘know’ but also to ‘love’ through the pleasure of reading runs throughout Lowth’s work. Poetry is “commonly understood to have two objects in view, namely, advantage and pleasure, or rather an [sic] union of both”⁷² and it is this union for which he is striving. Rather than in conflict (a conflict which, as we shall see, runs from Plato to the present), poetry is actually in harmony with the more analytical enquiries of the philosopher.

However, as in the above exposition on the double-edged arguments for biblical accuracy and authority, Lowth’s approach also brought with it another

69 Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, p. 55.

70 Ibid., p. 8.

71 Ibid., p. 4.

72 Ibid.

levering of the lid on Pandora's Box. In order to create a sense of the poetic authority of biblical writing, Lowth wanted to utilize the methods and theories that had been used to analyse the works of Homer, Pindar and Horace but also to emphasize that this Hebrew poetry of "higher origin" is sacred. As he argues:

It is indeed, most true, that sacred poetry, if we contemplate its origin alone, is far superior to both *nature* and *art*; but if we would rightly estimate its excellences, that is, if we wish to understand its power in exciting the human affections, we must have recourse to both; for we must consider what those affections are, and by what means they are to be so excited.⁷³

Lowth's method of approaching and understanding the Bible's superior 'sacred poetry' is to go through both nature and art, a fusion that has significant consequences for the Romantics influenced by Lowth's thinking. What is also important, and part of the ongoing paradox for the construction of aesthetic authority for the Bible, is Lowth's emphasis on a literary criticism caught between affirming the sacred transcendence of biblical poetics and laying them bare to theoretical understanding.

One of Lowth's key contributions is his celebrated exposition of what he calls 'parallelism', citing the first example from "one of the most remote periods of the Mosaic history,"⁷⁴ the address of Lamech to his wives in Gen. 4:23–24:

Hadah and Sillah, hear my voice;
Ye wives of Lamech, hearken to my speech:
For I have slain a man, because of my wounding;
A young man, because of my hurt.
If Cain shall be avenged seven times,
Certainly Lamech seventy and seven.

According to Lowth, this is an "indubitable specimen of the poetry of the first ages."⁷⁵ It is composed of three distiches, couplets expressing a single idea, and demonstrates the parallelism that is,

⁷³ Ibid., pp. 22–23.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 43. It is important not to overstate Lowth's historical-critical outlook; he does not question, for example, the historicity or chronology of the final form of the biblical material.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 44.

chiefly observable in those passages which frequently occur in the Hebrew poetry, in which they treat one subject in many different ways, and dwell upon the same sentiment; when they express the same things in a similar form of word; when equals refer to equals, and opposites to opposites: and since this artifice of composition seldom fails to produce even in prose an agreeable and measured cadence, we can scarcely doubt that it must have imparted to their poetry, were we masters of the versification, an exquisite degree of beauty and grace.⁷⁶

Lowth goes to great lengths throughout the rest of his lectures to demonstrate more of the subtleties and technicalities of Hebrew poetry, extending his work into examinations of allegory, parable, images from nature, and so on. However, it is his acknowledgement that Hebrew poetry also produces a poetic prose that is so significant for the ongoing development of both Romantic and post-modern theories of poetry. He also contributes to the debates that poetry is, in fact, the 'original' language of religion. As Lowth notes, "the original office and destination of poetry" seems to be its employment on "sacred subjects, and in subservience to religion."⁷⁷ This has important consequences, for "if the actual origin of poetry [. . .] must of necessity be referred to religion,"⁷⁸ and "only at an advanced period of society conformed to rule and method, it must be wholly attributed to the more violent affections of the heart, the nature of which is to express themselves in an animated and lofty tone, with a vehemence of expression far remote from vulgar use."⁷⁹ Religion in general, and biblical poetry in particular then, can be a poetic prose that is rooted in the sublimity of, say Job's "violent sorrow,"⁸⁰ "the veil being, as it were, suddenly removed, all the affections and emotions of the soul, its sudden impulses, its hasty sallies and irregularities [. . .] conspicuously displayed."⁸¹

In his notion of the sublime, that which "strikes and overpowers the mind, which excites the passions, and which expresses ideas at once with perspicuity and elevation,"⁸² Lowth states that he is drawing directly on the ideas attributed to Longinus (*On the Sublime* ca. 1st century AD, although authorship is widely disputed). Unrecognized but undoubtedly an influence is John Dennis's work of 1704, entitled *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry*. Dennis had used

76 Ibid., p. 34.

77 Ibid., p. 18.

78 Ibid.

79 Ibid.

80 Ibid., p. 152.

81 Ibid., p. 151.

82 Ibid., p. 149.

Longinus to conclude that “the greatest sublimity is to be deriv’d from Religious Ideas”⁸³ and that “poetry is the natural Language of Religion.”⁸⁴ The poetic Bible is to be read not only as a document that is run through with historical difference; in this very difference from an Enlightenment worldview resides something ineffable, something altogether different on another, sublime, level. Rooting language in an original religious poetic could provide a sense of theological authority that aligned with Anthony Blackwall’s claim in 1725 that “the true sublime will bear translation into all languages, and will be great and surprising in all languages.”⁸⁵ However, as Stephen Prickett claims, “[. . .] the *idea* of a language of primal or original participation in this sense is only possible to an age that no longer possesses it.”⁸⁶ A sense of the ‘original text’ in an ‘original language’ becomes a major project of discovery and animating absence for both types of Bible. The historical critics attempt an archaeology of biblical linguistics to excavate the authority of the ‘original’; poets and writers go on to attempt a new sense of the ‘originality’ of religious-poetic genius in the sublime aesthetic authority of the poetic Bible.

The influences of Lowth’s work were wide and various. On a technical level, he had discovered a poetic craft of parallelism in many Hebrew texts,⁸⁷ muddying the waters between poetry and prose and allowing a new sense of biblical poetic-prose that would continue to spill over into arguments about the aesthetic qualities of translated Bibles. He had disputed Jerome’s aligning of Greek and Hebrew metres (although Herder would later chastise Lowth for making similar mistakes in reading Hebrew through classical Greek literary theory), arguing that the prophetic books in particular had been produced by “certain colleges of prophets, removed altogether from an intercourse with the

83 John Dennis, *The Critical Works of John Dennis*, ed. E. N. Hooker, vol. 1 (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1939), p. 358. Qtd. Prickett, *Words and The Word: Language, Poetics and Biblical Interpretation*, p. 40.

84 Dennis, *The Critical Works of John Dennis*, p. 364. Qtd. Prickett, *Words and The Word: Language, Poetics and Biblical Interpretation*, p. 40.

85 Anthony Blackwell, *Sacred Classics Defended and Illustrated* (London: J. Bettenham, 1725), pp. 276–77. Qtd. Sheehan, “The Poetics and Politics of Theodicy,” p. 216.

86 Prickett, *Words and The Word: Language, Poetics and Biblical Interpretation*, p. 86.

87 Although this ‘parallelism’ has been debated and critiqued in the centuries since Lowth, not least between Robert Alter’s *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990) and James L. Kugel’s *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and its History* (New Haven and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1981), I am not arguing for the veracity of Lowth’s analysis here. The focus at present is on how his work contributes to the ideal of a ‘poetic’ bible.

world”⁸⁸ who produced sacred hymns and poetry for Temple worship. This allowed him to read the Hebrew נביא (*nabi*) as equally denoting “a prophet, a poet, or a musician, under the influence of Divine inspiration,”⁸⁹ a reading that would have profound implications for Romantic conceptions of the role of the inspired poet and William Blake’s millenarian tendencies in particular. Lowth’s arguments surrounding the passionate and sublime nature of Hebrew poetry and his equating of poet and prophet would continue to haunt literary scholars and poets writing on ‘Bible’ through the subsequent centuries. It also inaugurated a shift that Lowth certainly did not want to promote; the gradual move to the intrinsic autotelic authority of the poetic imagination, separate from the prophet’s obedience to “the one common name, one common origin, one common author, the Holy Spirit.”⁹⁰

German scholars received his work differently. Lowth’s Latin *Lectures* were published in 1758; his commentary on Isaiah, with extensive notes by Johann David Michaelis, was published in German in 1778. The *Lectures* were also partially translated into German by C. B. Schmidt in 1793.⁹¹ As Stephen Prickett underlines:

For such figures as J. G. Eichhorn, G. E. Lessing, H. S. Reimarus, J. G. Herder, the Bible had to be read not merely as one might read any other book, but specifically as a record of the myths and aspirations of an ancient and primitive Near Eastern tribe [. . .]. What meaning there was in such stories was *moral and developmental* rather than historical—illustrating what Lessing, in the title of one of his best-known books, had called *The Education of the Human Race* (1780). If such narratives were to be given a different status from those, say, of ancient Greece or Rome, it was for their ‘moral beauty’ or the profoundly ethical nature of their teachings.⁹²

For these scholars, there was less of a focus on poetics and more on the development of the *ethical* imagination.

Johann Gottfried Herder felt that Lowth had been too technically orientated with his focus on examining linguistic ‘connexions’, taking too much of his analytical toolkit from classical literary criticism. Although he opens *The Spirit*

88 Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, p. 194.

89 Ibid., p. 195.

90 Ibid., p. 196.

91 See Prickett, *Words and The Word: Language, Poetics and Biblical Interpretation*, pp. 49–50.

92 Prickett, “Introduction,” p. 319. My emphasis.

of *Hebrew Poetry* (1782) with a respectful acknowledgement of “the beautiful and justly celebrated work of Bp. Lowth,”⁹³ Herder “was always concerned with entering the ‘spirit’ of an age, a man, a people or a work. His endeavor was to his mind not only different from but often impeded in principle by technical, categorical investigation.”⁹⁴ Hans Frei overstates the case for Herder’s difference from Lowth somewhat, especially because they share a project in utilizing poetic authority as consonant with divine authority and poetic reading as a truer, more theologically acute manner to approach the Bible in an age of criticism. Herder, although perhaps not as diligent as Lowth on the technicalities of biblical poetics, contributes much to the upcoming discussion of the influence of this poetic Bible on the orientation of Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Blake through his focus on the sympathetic and the sublime elements of biblical literature.

Johann Gottfried Herder, the Book of Job, and the spirit of
Einfühlung

In Germany, Johann Andreas Cramer’s *Poetic Translations of the Psalms*, published in 1755, demonstrated a “desire to overcome archaism” and “set the modern soul aflame with the passions of the Hebrews.”⁹⁵ For Cramer, “religion itself had very little to do with thought or reasoned analysis . . . [r]ather literature, or more precisely poetry was injected into the very veins of religion. The Bible was poetic because, in essence, religion was poetic.”⁹⁶ Herder was also concerned with ‘the modern soul’ and the poetry of religion but broadened his theory of the spirit of Hebrew poetry to encompass both biblical poetry itself and the means by which contemporary readers could access their literary and spiritual past. Once again, we can see how a process of inoculating biblical authority against biblical criticism is in operation. Herder writes: “Let the scholar then study the Old Testament, even if it be only as a human book full of ancient poetry, with kindred feeling and affection, and thus will the New come forth to us of itself in its purity, its sublime glory, and more than earthly beauty.”⁹⁷ For Herder, the Old Testament is a human book of an ancient and distant time and can be studied critically and with whatever historical tools the scholar can bring to bear. In comparison, it is the New Testament that

93 Johann Gottfried Herder, *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*, trans. James Marsh, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Burlington: Edward Smith, 1833), p. 13.

94 Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*, p. 184.

95 Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture*, p. 150, p. 155.

96 *Ibid.*, p. 157.

97 Herder, *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*, pp. 22–23.

offers a 'more than earthly beauty'. Herder, like Lowth, is caught again in the dance between historical veracity and poetic sublime truth, having to choose, finally, which truth is more universal and appropriate for the spirit of his age. How does he attempt to choreograph his work?

Herder sets up his exposition in volume one of *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry* as a conversation between two characters, Alciphron and Euthyphron,⁹⁸ explaining that "the former speaks very much such sentiments as are uttered by the publick with its hundred heads, but they speak to one another alone, teach and controvert nobody in the world besides themselves. Whoever does not agree with Euthyphron, may retain the opinion of Alciphron, or—have his own opinion."⁹⁹ Herder outlines what this dialogue achieves in his preface: elucidation, brevity, animating variety and human interest, avoidance of numberless citations, and so on.¹⁰⁰ While it does all of these things, the conversational tone also allows Herder to exclude other voices. Time and again in biblical scholarship of the period (and later), these excluded voices are both those of the 'ancient Hebrews' and those of Jews contemporaneous to the critics. Herder uses the word *Einfühlung* to indicate an imaginative understanding and empathy as a way of entering the world and culture that produced such poetry. But this empathy only goes so far. In Dialogue IX, Alciphron complains that the patriarchs of Genesis are narrow and arrogant and that there surely must be a strong dissonance between the true conception of God and the way the patriarchs represent Him. How could such men found a nation chosen by God? Euthyphron answers,

98 Herder's use of the characters Alciphron and Euthyphron references philosopher George Berkeley's *Alciphron, or the Minute Philosopher: Containing an Apology for the Christian Religion, against those who are called Free-thinkers* (1732) which had been translated into German in 1737. In classical literature and philosophy, *Euthyphro* (meaning 'right-minded' or 'sincere') is one of Plato's early dialogues. Herder characterizes this voice as rational and self-possessed, guiding the more wayward mind of Alciphron in the discussion. For Berkeley, Alciphron is the voice of the free-thinker ("Thought is that which we are told distinguishes Man from Beast: and Freedom of Thought makes as great a difference between Man and Man." George Berkeley, *Alciphron: or, the Minute Philosopher. In Seven Dialogues. Containing an Apology for the Christian Religion against those who are called Free-thinkers*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (London: J. Tonson, 1732), p. 8.). For Herder's 'hundred-headed' Alciphron, there are more resonances with the classical Greek figure, under whose name we have 116 fictional letters written between and expressing opinions of 'commoners' in Athenian society.

99 Herder, *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*, p. 21.

100 See *Ibid.*, pp. 20–21.

I am no Hebrew, and have no interest in this people, as a people. They were certainly not chosen for their own worthiness, and no one has exposed their weakness and shame with more force, than their own prophets. I willingly grant you, that they greatly misapprehended the purpose of their election and peculiar privileges, and sadly profaned with superstition and idolatry, with stupid pride, obsequious vanity, and other vices, that Palladium, for which they assumed far too much credit to themselves—their faith in Jehovah, as the only and the true God.¹⁰¹

Herder's focus is not on ancient or contemporary Jews but on the purposes of (the Christian) God in history and the subsequent "flowers of that poetick growth."¹⁰² As we saw with Erasmus' and Luther's desires to translate the Bible into a language that effectively distances and glosses over the Jewishness of these texts, Herder's approach (echoing Lowth) is to empathetically enter the Old Testament world, arguing that,

in order to judge of a nation, we must live in their time, in their own country, must adopt their modes of thinking and feeling, must see, how they lived, how they were educated, what scenes they looked upon, what were the objects of their affection and passion, the character of their atmosphere, their skies, the structures of their organs, their dances and their musick.¹⁰³

101 Ibid., pp. 219–20. See also this example of dialogue:

E – "I know of no people whose poetry like theirs has made the poverty of their country exhibit the fulness of God, and consecrated its narrow limits as a theatre for displaying the Majesty of Jehovah. Even now the great mass of this dispersed race delude themselves with hopes drawn from this source, because the traditions of the race, its laws, its poetry, every thing has relation to the promised land, and, as it were, without a country to rest upon, the tree of their hopes still flourishes and waves in the air above.

A – Uninteresting enough, too, for us, since we are not of that country, and cannot read the denunciations of their prophets against other countries with the enthusiasm, with which they listened to them. All their golden dreams of the glory of this narrow region, under a king so long waited for and still to be waited for, seem to us mere dreams of folly; and a greater part of their poetry is to us equally empty and unmeaning." p. 236.

102 Ibid., p. 220.

103 Ibid., p. 28.

However, in the desire to make this text breathe again with a poetic authority,¹⁰⁴ this judgement is unavoidably influenced by eighteenth century philosophies of the sympathetic and the sublime.¹⁰⁵

Both Lowth and Herder argue for the sublime nature of Hebrew poetry and both see this at its most extreme and affecting in the Book of Job. As Jonathan Sheehan explores, Job's poem

became a site for an extended reflection on the status of the Bible in the modern world, its poetry a means for reinvigorating a Bible threatened by loss of stature and significance. But this means of reinvigoration was not simply aesthetic. The Book of Job drew attention not just for its exemplary poetic status, but also for the *content* that this poetry bore, a content freighted with political and religious claims about the power of God and the limitations of the human.¹⁰⁶

Herder reads the book of Job as "the first impressions in relation to the incomprehensible Creator. Power, boundless power, is the attribute that first fixes the attention of a feeble creature of the earth [. . .]. The ancient book of Job

104 For Euthyphron, the Hebrew language "is the very breath of the soul." Ibid., p. 35.

105 An influence on Lessing and others within the Romantic movement, Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) set much of the tone for this discussion. Echoing Frei's sense of a sublime submission to the text, Burke writes "The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force. Astonishment . . . is the effect of the sublime in its highest degree; the inferior effects are admiration, reverence and respect." Edmund Burke, "A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful," in *British Literature: 1640–1789*, ed. Robert DeMaria Jr. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), p. 797. On the 'sympathetic' Sheehan notes that, "sympathy was a complicated mechanism. In Enlightenment moral psychology and aesthetics alike, sympathy was never merely an affirmation of proximity (between man and man, Hebrew and modern). It was always a double-edged sword, also inserting distance between sympathizer and victim. Lessing's extended reflection on sympathy—the 1766 *Laocöon*—insisted that too much identification between viewer and victim can only arouse disgust, forcing viewers to look away in an effort to avoid exact identification with the victim of pain." Sheehan, "The Poetics and Politics of Theodicy," pp. 217–8.

106 Sheehan, "The Poetics and Politics of Theodicy," p. 213.

furnishes the clearest proof of this on every page.”¹⁰⁷ As an example of this, Herder translates Job for himself:

Well do I know, that it is thus,
 For what is a man, against God?
 Even the wise, and the powerful,
 Who hath witnessed him, and prospered?
 He removeth mountains in a moment,
 He overturneth them in his wrath.
 He shaketh the earth from its foundation,
 And its pillars tremble.
 He commandeth the sun, and it riseth not;
 He sealeth up the stars in their dwellings;
 He spreadeth out the heavens alone,
 And walketh upon the summit of the waves.¹⁰⁸

Herder's double-bind of sympathy and sublimity exhibits contradictions that also go a long way to underscoring other aspects of restoring biblical authority through the poetic Bible—the political and nationalistic Bible. For Lowth, Job's poem is a master-class in aligning form and content which is “no less excellent in the expression and excitation of terror.”¹⁰⁹ Herder takes Job further according to Sheehan because, “as a composition, Job justifies itself, and does so by virtue of the *effects* that it can produce in any reader, regardless of translation or nation.”¹¹⁰ Invited into this textual world through Alciphron's argument that “Poetry, in order to affect the heart and understanding, must combine beauty with truth, and animate both with sympathetick feeling,”¹¹¹ we are suddenly overwhelmed by the sublimity of terror in the great monarchical structure of this “true theodicee”. We stand, with Job, “put to silence and confounded.”¹¹²

Herder had questioned Lowth's focus on the technical aspects of Hebrew poetry rather than its ‘spirit’. In relation to Job, Lowth had argued that this was not a dramatic poem in the Aristotelian sense, and that “it yields to none in sublimity of style, and in every grace and excellence of composition”¹¹³ but had also shaped this analysis around the moral “particularly inculcated in it, ‘Be

107 Herder, *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*, p. 52.

108 Translator's rendering of Herder's translation of Job 9: 1–9. Ibid., pp. 52–3.

109 Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, p. 186.

110 Sheehan, “The Poetics and Politics of Theodicy,” p. 223.

111 Herder, *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*. p. 73.

112 Ibid., p. 119.

113 Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, p. 390.

not high-minded, but fear' [. . .]."¹¹⁴ Sheehan notes that the "didactic aspect of the poem, for Lowth, lies principally in the content of the work: its express message of human subordination to the divine. For Herder, by contrast, the didactic becomes phenomenological. The message of terror and domination must be *experienced*."¹¹⁵ The poetry is not simply read by a reading subject; it is enacted and the reader becomes subjected within its system. This is divine authority mediated through the reading of the *poetic* Bible—the Bible's poetry, particularly for many thinkers and writers during this period contained in the book of Job, is active *upon* the sympathies and subjecthood of those who read it.

Sheehan sees this development of the argument for a poetic sublime as stemming from the influence of increasing incredulity, Voltaire's in particular, towards Leibniz's treatise of 1710, *Théodicée*: "Just as theodicy ceases to be persuasive [. . .] poetry comes (and came) to the rescue, as the medium able to set theodicy free from the shackles of cognition and knowledge."¹¹⁶ This is poetry both as literal writing, as a poem on the page to be read, but also a poetic in the extensive sense of an all-encompassing vision and knowing. Although, as we shall see, some Romantic poets take this extensive poetic as emanating from themselves at centre, perhaps in relation to the divine but still within the ambit of their inspired creativity, this poetic sublime is "the vehicle to create the *experience* of theodicy itself. Its poetic structure and its message together force the reader both sincerely to indict God with Job, and then, like him, to stand dumbfounded in front of that '*divine decision*', repenting in dust and ashes."¹¹⁷ Thus a theological authority is reinscribed into the ideal of this 'poetic' Bible as it retains the sovereign force of command and submission.

However, Herder's sense of the place of the subject in the face of the divine is nothing if not complex. One can certainly discern his political understanding of the subject's submissive place within an ordered sovereign economy but Herder also argues that God "gave him also language and the powers of poetical invention, and thus far is the origin of poetry Divine."¹¹⁸ But, since there is no access to the true Divine Language, "we must argue from the effect to the cause, from the outward working to the inward form of feeling, and thus we

114 Ibid., p. 384.

115 Sheehan, "The Poetics and Politics of Theodicy," p. 224.

116 Ibid., p. 226.

117 Ibid.

118 Johann Gottfried Herder, *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*, trans. James Marsh, 2 vols., vol. 2 (Burlington: Edward Smith, 1833), p. 6.

treat of the origin of poetry only as human.”¹¹⁹ In a line that echoes through the Romantics’ self-conception of their creative potency Herder explains that

[i]n giving names to all, and ordering all from the impulse of his own inward feeling, and with reference to himself, he (Adam) becomes an imitator of the Divinity, a second Creator, [. . .] a creative poet. Following the origin of the poetick art, instead of placing its essence in an imitation of nature, as has generally been done, we might still more boldly place it in an imitation of that Divine agency which creates, and gives form and determinateness to the objects of its creation.¹²⁰

This dance between Romantic creative subject and subjected/created (textual) self continues throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and into contemporary work on selfhood and textual authority and I shall join with it again. I want to leave Herder at this point and move towards following the historical-critical and poetic Bibles into the Romantic period and, later, contemporary notions of a cultural, national Bible, produced by all these agendas and more.

In some senses Herder’s attempt at a sublime submission to the biblical can be seen as the last vestiges of the interpretational flow that Hans Frei identifies. If many biblical elements could no longer be read as referentially coincident with actual historical occurrence, a vital element of the ratios of a coherent epistemology, then “the *meaning* of the stories was finally something different from the stories or depictions themselves, despite the fact that this is contrary to the character of a realistic story.”¹²¹ The meanings of the biblical text could now be approached from a variety of authoritative angles: as an archival text divorced from a contemporary Enlightened worldview, depicting the distant past of the human story, a type of museum text, the ‘primitive culture’ of the Hebrews;¹²² or, conversely, as a collection of sublimely poetic texts that, if read with reverence and skill, could transport the reader back in time through sympathetic identification, as with the plight of Job. As Sheehan expands, “by the 1780s . . . the Enlightenment Bible was complete [. . .]. The

119 Ibid., p. 7.

120 Ibid., pp. 7–8.

121 Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*, p. 11.

122 As Sheehan notes, for Schleiermacher in the nineteenth century, the Hebrew Bible became a ‘mausoleum’. Judaism was condemned to irrelevance and Schleiermacher himself never preached on the Old Testament. Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture*, p. 233.

philologists, pedagogues, poets, and historians had invented a distributed, ramified, diverse Bible, but one independent of theology, one that could survive embedded within the matrix of 'culture.'¹²³ But these were not efforts to disrobe 'Bible' of its authoritative covers; it was to reinvent its authority as always living on in that most diffusive of concepts—culture—constructed from a network of social currencies; literary quality, pedagogical virtue, philological exemplarity, historical depth.¹²⁴ This is where these diffuse Bibles, produced under the different outworkings of Enlightenment sensibilities, flow into the cultural Bible, a Bible embedded in narratives of Western tradition and heritage. Instead of being the sectarian property of various religious traditions and theologies, it becomes a construction site, a space for Western ideas about itself. It is viewed, especially in its national manifestations, in this case the Lutheran and the King James or Authorised Version, as both producer *and* product of a language, a literary canon, and a part of the 'national character'.

The final section of this chapter will provide a brief overview of how these elements can be seen to be in operation in the 400th anniversary celebrations of the King James Version. At this point, however, I want to take a different track and examine how the historical-critical and poetic Bibles play out for a Romantic movement that, in Britain especially, has had such profound influences on understandings of the nature of poetry, the poet, and the poetic imagination. Furthermore, it recognizes the complex shifting of authority between external historical realities (especially the prior support for and subsequent horror at the French Revolution, and the increasing mechanization and social ordering of society in the ongoing Industrial Revolution) and the 'inward' creative subject who reads Bibles in this context. This will enable me to continue to demonstrate how the different ideal types of biblical authority influence and transcend the confessional and non-confessional divide. All reading approaches remain bound to a form of biblical authority; taking their lead from Lowth and Herder in particular, the Romantics blur the boundaries between the creative and the critical even further.

Confessions of Enquiring Romantics: Poets, Prophets and Biblical Criticism

As I cannot hope to cover all the nuances of different 'Romanticisms' and their relations to 'Bible', I will confine myself to a few comments in relation to some

¹²³ Ibid., p. 220.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

landmarks of the Romantic period in order to re-orientate what I have been calling the 'poetic' Bible. This move is signalled by Walter Lowe as he offers a warning that would be wise to bear in mind as I go on to link Romantic conceptions of poetic imagination with postmodern biblical criticism in subsequent chapters. What he calls 'Prima Facie Postmodernism' proceeds "by collapsing modernity into the Enlightenment, and then collapsing the Enlightenment into the Newtonian worldview—all the while professing sensitivity to difference."¹²⁵ This section now attempts to redress this balance and acknowledge the complex difficulties for a biblical studies whose heritage is rooted in Romanticism as well as Enlightenment. As Lowe goes on to argue, "while it is easy enough to argue that postmodernism represents a break from Newton, it is more difficult to show that postmodernism represents a break, let alone an epochal disjunction, from Romanticism."¹²⁶ Indeed, and this is something I shall engage with in more detail in the next chapter, some postmodern obsessions with 'the unsayable'¹²⁷ and 'presenting the unrepresentable' might be seen as participating "in the [Romantic] fashion for the sublime (which is seen as a male preserve)."¹²⁸ The sublime mutates into a project of para-metaphysical linguistic *jouissance*.

Another difficulty is the inherently problematic task of defining the term 'Romantic', a word that did not even refer to the notion of an artistic movement until 1844.¹²⁹ For Edward Larrissy, this anachronistic and retroactive definition is telling; "one might see the latter-day Romantic ideologist not only as colluding with the objects of enquiry, but as constituting them as Romantic."¹³⁰ Pushed further, and with an emphasis on Lyotardian historical atemporality, Larrissy suggests that, because of the period in which he has received his widest readership, a poet like William Blake is actually a late nineteenth century and twentieth century poet, "important to the understanding of Swinburne, Yeats and Joyce, Ginsberg and Hughes."¹³¹ Just as different ideal types of Bible are created through different ideals of authority and authenticity, Romanticism

125 Walter Lowe, "Christianity and Anti-Judaism," in *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments*, ed. Yvonne Sherwood and Kevin Hart (London & New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 112.

126 Ibid.

127 See, for example, Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser (eds.), *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987).

128 Edward Larrissy, "Introduction," in *Romanticism and Postmodernism*, ed. Edward Larrissy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 4.

129 Ibid., p. 2.

130 Ibid., p. 2.

131 Ibid., p. 10.

and the Romantic canon is created as “a Modernist constitution,”¹³² fit to be a precursor to both Modernism and Postmodernism and the shadow-side to what is designated ‘the Enlightenment’.

With this in mind, and acknowledging that Enlightenment and Romanticism are, in large part, products of our own contemporary narratives and genealogies, I do not want to simply mark a chronology and split between Enlightenments and Romanticisms. Both movements are struggling with their contemporary revolutions of modernity, best exemplified in France in 1789 and in the ongoing technological modernisation of the Industrial Revolution. While the intellectual revolutions of the Enlightenments emphasized an ‘age of reason’, with renewed focus on appropriate and rational epistemologies, seen variously in the biblical projects I have outlined above, the Romantic revolution seems both inspired and repelled by the freedoms and terrors of change.

For writers such as William Blake, the ‘Glad Day’¹³³ that seemed to dawn with the Enlightenment had darkened with the enthronement of ‘Urizen’, a god of ‘your reason’ perhaps also recalling the Greek verb *ourizen*, meaning limit: “Urizen, God of limit and law, is the toxic distillate of all that oppresses true humanity: benighted reason, religious reification, economic exploitation—and bad art.”¹³⁴ For Blake, this becomes a complex argument for the poet-prophet, one who can argue, on the one hand, that ‘all religions are one’, based on “each Nation’s different reception of the Poetic Genius, which is every where call’d the Spirit of Prophecy.”¹³⁵ On the other, he could also argue that there is ‘no natural religion’ against the Deists who would organize a world-view through their own empirical sense-experience without allowing for the inbreaking of this prophetic-poetic reception. As Blake proclaims, “if it were not for the Poetic or Prophetic character the Philosophic & Experimental would soon be at the ratio of all things, & stand still unable to do other than repeat the same dull round over again.”¹³⁶ With Blake we hear the echoes of Herder and, more particularly, Lowth. As John Drury explains, “with Lowth and

132 Ibid., p. 4.

133 Blake’s painting of 1794, a young man, naked and arms outstretched, a glorious dawn breaking as if he “himself were the source”, reproduced in Ibid., p. 114.

134 Ibid., p. 116.

135 William Blake, “All Religions are One,” in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. M. H. Abrams and Stephen Greenblatt (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), p. 41.

136 ———, “There is no Natural Religion,” in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. M. H. Abrams and Stephen Greenblatt (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), p. 42.

Blake the flights of human imagination came to be seen as the primary subject matter of an urgent and vivid biblical Christianity, an exegetical duty rather than an aberration."¹³⁷ In positioning the poet in relation to the divine, and in relation to the sacred biblical writings, Lowth attempted a balance;

[...] I shall endeavour to detract nothing from the dignity of that inspiration which proceeds from higher causes, while I allow the genius of each writer his own peculiar excellence and accomplishments. I am indeed of opinion, that the Divine Spirit by no means takes such an entire possession of the mind of the prophet, as to subdue or extinguish the character and genius of the man; the natural powers of the mind are in general elevated and refined, they are neither eradicated nor totally obscured.¹³⁸

This careful and precarious balancing act between sublime submission to the Divine and the upholding of the 'character and [quasi-divine] genius of man' is re-imagined in Blake to be a creative tension between the oppositions of Heaven and Hell, or 'Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate'. But, even in trying to sustain these tensions, Blake edges towards the philosophy that "Energy is Eternal Delight."¹³⁹ Just as he understands why Milton wrote in "fetters when he wrote of Angels and God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, is because he was a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it,"¹⁴⁰ the same might be said of Blake's own philosophies of the poet-prophet and his understanding that the "Jewish & Christian Testaments are An original derivation from the Poetic Genius."¹⁴¹ As self-appointed heir to this Poetic Genius, Blake could thus dine with Isaiah and Ezekiel and talk of the "firm perswasion" that in "ages of imagination . . . removed mountains."¹⁴²

Lowth's lectures gave the poet a new status as "a prophet, seer, and mediator of divine truth."¹⁴³ Reading William Wordsworth's extended preface for the 1802 publication of *The Lyrical Ballads*, one can discern his reading of some of the tensions inherent in Lowth's ideas of the origins of Hebrew prophetic poetry, especially the balance between local particularity and sense,

¹³⁷ Drury, "Introductory Essay," p. 20.

¹³⁸ Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, p. 168.

¹³⁹ William Blake, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. M. H. Abrams and Stephen Greenblatt (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), p. 74.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 74–5.

¹⁴¹ Blake, "All Religions are One," p. 41.

¹⁴² ———, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," p. 77.

¹⁴³ Prickett, "Introduction," p. 325.

and universal achievement and sublimity. In Lecture VII, 'Of poetic imagery from common life', Lowth explains that Israel, as a "nation of husbandmen and shepherds"¹⁴⁴ was "contented with those arts which were necessary to a simple and uncultivated (or rather uncorrupted) state of life"¹⁴⁵ and were able to make "use of the boldest imagery with the most perfect perspicuity, and the most common and familiar with the greatest dignity . . . a commendation almost peculiar to the sacred poets."¹⁴⁶ The movement between the common rustic life and sacred poetry is made through *enthusiasm*, "a style and expression directly prompted by nature itself, and exhibiting the true and express image of a mind violently agitated,"¹⁴⁷ informing a poetry "excellently adapted to the exciting of every internal emotion, and making a more forcible impression upon the mind than abstract reasoning could possibly effect [. . .]."¹⁴⁸ Wordsworth, in his turn, noted that "the earliest Poets of all nations generally wrote from passion excited by real events; they wrote naturally, and as men: feeling powerfully as they did, their language was daring and figurative."¹⁴⁹ Thus, Wordsworth proposed

in these [Lyrical Ballads] . . . to chuse incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible, in a selection of language really used by men; and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way; and, further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature: chiefly, as far as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement.¹⁵⁰

Poetry is both an inaugural 'natural' language, unencumbered with style and rhetoric, 'close to the language of men', and an epistemological writing. In fact, it is

¹⁴⁴ Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, p. 71.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁴⁹ William Wordsworth, "Appendix to the Preface to Lyrical Ballads: 'By what is usually called Poetic Diction,'" Pennsylvania State University, <http://www.english.upenn.edu/~mgamer/Etexts/lbprose.html>.

¹⁵⁰ William Wordsworth, "Preface to Lyrical Ballads," Pennsylvania State University, <http://www.english.upenn.edu/~mgamer/Etexts/lbprose.html>.

the most philosophic of all writing . . . its object is truth, not individual and local, but general, and operative; not standing upon external testimony, but carried alive into the heart by passion; truth which is its own testimony, which gives strength and divinity to the tribunal to which it appeals, and receives them from the same tribunal. Poetry is the image of man and nature [Poetry] is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge; it is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all Science . . . the first and last of all knowledge—it is as immortal as the heart of man.¹⁵¹

After such expressions of the nature of poetry, it follows that the poet is

a man, it is true, endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind; a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him; delighting to contemplate similar volitions and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the Universe, and habitually impelled to create them where he does not find them.¹⁵²

Wordsworth's long autobiographical poem, *The Prelude, or Growth of a Poet's Mind*, ostensibly addressed to his close friend and confidant, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, allows him to self-consciously take on the role of poet-prophet, focussing on the development of a poetic self through crisis and recovery in a post-revolutionary dystopia, reading

[. . .] The unfettered clouds, and region of the Heavens,
Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light—
... all like workings of one mind, the features
Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree,
Characters of the great Apocalypse,
The types and symbols of Eternity,
Of first and last, and midst, and without end.¹⁵³

151 Ibid.

152 Ibid.

153 William Wordsworth, "The Prelude or Growth of a Poet's Mind," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, p. 348. lines 635–641.

The poet-prophet interprets the characters, types and symbols of the Book of Nature and the Book of Books together, speaking to and having the power to recreate the world after the apocalypse of revolution.

I want to continue to explore the links between the founders of what I am calling the 'poetic' Bible and the Romantics by turning to Samuel Taylor Coleridge. I am not treating him strictly as poet *per se* but as a religious thinker and interpreter of 'Bible', intimately informed by his own sense of the poetic spirit. Again, it is impossible to cover the entirety of Coleridge's thought on the religious and poetic imagination.¹⁵⁴ I shall focus on his *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* published posthumously in 1849 with some comments on Coleridge's complex and fragmented notions of the poetic imagination and the poet's fraught relation to 'Bible'.

Coleridge and the Panharmonicon of the Poetic Bible

Coleridge's *Confessions* were originally titled 'Letters on the Inspiration of the Scriptures' and it was his nephew and editor, Henry Nelson Coleridge, who substituted this for the more grandiose and allusive 'confessions'.¹⁵⁵ It is in these letters that we find Coleridge's famous enunciation on reading his Bible; "[...] in the Bible there is more that *finds* me than I have experienced in all other books put together; that the words of the Bible find me at greater depths of my being; and that whatever finds me brings with it an irresistible evidence of its having proceeded from the Holy Spirit."¹⁵⁶ His argument in the letters is with the doctrine of the infallibility of scripture, and the phrasing of his argument betrays its roots in Herder and Lowth. As he states in Letter II,

... I receive willingly also the truth of the history, namely, that the Word of the Lord did come to Samuel, to Isaiah, to others; and that the words which gave utterance to the same are faithfully recorded. But though the origins of the words, even as of the miraculous acts, be supernatural—yet the former once uttered—the latter once having taken their place among the phenomena of the senses, the faithful recording of the same does not of itself imply, or seem to require, any supernatural working, other than as all truth and goodness as such.¹⁵⁷

154 See David Jasper, ed. *The Interpretation of Belief: Coleridge, Schleiermacher and Romanticism* (London: Macmillan Press, 1986). This collection covers a wide range of pertinent topics that link Coleridge's thought with his contemporaries.

155 Prickett, *Words and The Word: Language, Poetics and Biblical Interpretation*, p. 5.

156 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1956), p. 43.

157 *Ibid.*, p. 44.

This passage echoes Lowth's pronouncements that although sacred poetry is "superior to both *nature* and *art*,"¹⁵⁸ in order to understand its excellences, we must relate it to both this-worldly phenomena. For Coleridge, the recorded ancient utterances have become texts and taken their place among the 'phenomena of senses'; with this in mind, "How can infallible truth be infallibly conveyed in defective and fallible expressions?"¹⁵⁹ Coleridge spends much of the rest of the 'confessions' dancing around the difficulty of how these biblical texts are to be approached. On the one hand, he makes the by now necessary distinction between the Bible itself and the Word of God, in his case, on reasoned moral grounds. He cannot see how a Christian divine, in discussing Jael's blessing after murdering Sisera (Judg. 4:2–22), is able to close the controversy by observing

that he wanted no better morality than that of the Bible, and no other proof of an action's being praiseworthy than that the Bible had declared it worthy to be praised;—an observation, as applied in this instance, so slanderous to the morality and moral spirit of the Bible as to be inexplicable, except as a consequence of the Doctrine in dispute [. . .].¹⁶⁰

This, for Coleridge, is an example of Bibliolatry, that "half-inflated bladder", swollen by the heat of rhetoric but shrunken in the "cool temperature of particulars."¹⁶¹ He is able to separate what he calls the 'moral spirit' of the Bible from its actual textual material; the Bible itself is not divinely infallible. However, according to Coleridge, this Bibliolatry, as much as it has been displayed by Christian divines, is practiced most strangely in that "favourite ornament and garnish of Jewish eloquence,"¹⁶² midrash, a "bringing together into logical dependency detached sentences from books composed at the distance of centuries, nay, sometimes a *millennium*, from each other, under different dispensations, and for different objects."¹⁶³ By following the dangerous doctrine of scriptural infallibility, from both Jewish and Christian perspectives, "by this strange mosaic, Scripture texts have been worked up into passable likenesses of Purgatory, Popery, the Inquisition, and other monstrous abuses."¹⁶⁴

158 Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, pp. 22–23.

159 Coleridge, *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*, p. 46.

160 *Ibid.*, pp. 56–7.

161 See *ibid.*, p. 58.

162 *Ibid.*, p. 59.

163 *Ibid.*, pp. 58–59.

164 *Ibid.*, p. 59.

Coleridge is caught in an interesting double-bind. He seems attracted to the results of a historical-critical 'Bible' that can disallow unreasonable figural or midrashic readings that result in doctrines with which he does not agree. But he does not want a full reductive method applied to his sense of biblical authority; "O the difference, the unspeakable difference, between an historico-critical *intellective* Study of the Old Testament, and the *praying* of the same! 'I mean the perusal of it with more a personal moral and religious Interest.'"¹⁶⁵ The text still conveys expressions that "are as direct as strong; and a true believer will neither attempt to divert or dilute their strength."¹⁶⁶ This strength can be discerned in the continued movement of the Bible;

the whole body of Holy Writ with all its harmonies and symmetrical gradations,—the flexile and the rigid—the supporting hard and the clothing soft,—the blood *which is the life*,—the intelligencing nerves, and the rudely woven, but soft and springy, cellular substance, in which all are embedded and lightly bound together. This breathing organism, this glorious *panharmonicon*, which I had seen stand on its feet as a man, and with a man's voice given to it, the Doctrine in question turns at once into a colossal Memnon's head, a hollow passage for a voice, a voice that mocks the voices of many men, and speaks in their names, and yet is but one voice and the same;—and no man uttered it, and never in a human heart was it conceived.¹⁶⁷

This is the 'poetic' Bible in full animation—but it can only dance to Coleridge's music if it has a human heart. The corpus is resurrected from a doctrine that silenced it and brought death; it can now speak in the voices of many men (as, in fact, it has spoken in the voices of many men down the centuries).

However, this is not to celebrate the plurality of the animated word too quickly. Coleridge "also recognized that language estranges man from divinity, that language itself is a fallen medium."¹⁶⁸ How does Coleridge, as poet-prophet, manage the Derridean 'anguish' brought on by

165 Graham Davidson, "S. T. Coleridge," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Bible in English Literature*, eds. Rebecca Lemon, et al. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), p. 422, quoting Kathleen Coburn and Anthony Harding, eds., *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 5 vols., vol. 5 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957–2002), p. 6241.

166 Coleridge, *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*, p. 48.

167 *Ibid.*, p. 52.

168 Patricia S. Yaeger, "Coleridge, Derrida, and the Anguish of Writing," *SubStance* 12, no. 2 (1983): p. 89.

the necessarily restricted passageway of speech against which all possible meanings push each other, preventing each other's emergence? Preventing, but calling upon each other, provoking each other too, unforeseeably and as if despite oneself, in a kind of autonomous overassemblage of meanings, a power of pure equivocality that makes the creativity of the classical God appear all too poor?¹⁶⁹

Patricia Yaeger argues that when Coleridge is overwhelmed by anguish and "sees too many metaphors,"¹⁷⁰ he retreats in frustration to a "clear representation of the logos, of the Word speaking without anguish, [regressing] to a safer mode of writing. He becomes nature's amanuensis or scribe; by implication his writing ceases to be his own and seems, comfortingly, to resemble God's."¹⁷¹ This would seem to link back to Herder's call that even the creative poet must submit to the overwhelming sublimity of the Divine in Nature. Indeed, Coleridge admits, in Blakean mode, that from the 'poetic Bible'

all these heart-awakening utterances of human hearts—of men of like faculties and passions with myself, mourning, rejoicing, suffering, triumphing—are but as a Divina Commedia of a superhuman . . . Ventri-loquist;— . . . the royal Harper, to whom I have so often submitted myself as a many-stringed instrument for his fire-tipt fingers to traverse, while every several nerve of emotion, passion, thought, that thrids the flesh-and-blood of our common humanity, responded to the touch . . .¹⁷²

Yet Coleridge is too much a poet-philosopher to allow himself to become completely subjected. He "is quite prepared to admit that he doesn't understand. He is puzzled, for example, by the episode in which Jacob wrestles with God, remarking that 'I have as yet had no Light given to me . . . The symbolic Import, & the immediate purpose, are alike hidden from me . . . The whole passage is a perfect episode—a sort of parenthesis in the narrative.'"¹⁷³ In his approach to reading Genesis particularly, Graham Davidson sees "first, Coleridge's philosophically charged desire to make coherent sense of the text; second, his utter failure to do so; and, third, his contemplation of a *poetic approach as a possible*

169 Derrida, "Force and Signification," p. 8. Yaeger uses this essay throughout her article and it is from her that I was directed to Derrida's essay.

170 Yaeger, "Coleridge, Derrida, and the Anguish of Writing," p. 94.

171 Ibid.

172 Coleridge, *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*, p. 53.

173 Davidson, "S. T. Coleridge," p. 419. Davidson quotes Coburn and Harding, eds., *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, p. 6198.

hermeneutic improvement.”¹⁷⁴ This move exemplifies a number of elements in the construction of the ‘poetic’ Bible: ideas around the poetic *content* of the material itself; the *effects* this art is supposed to have upon a reader; and, with Coleridge, how a *poetic approach* becomes a necessary hermeneutic possibility. He is still part of the ongoing reversal or eclipse of biblical narrative towards a renewed sense of subjecthood, although this is much more complex than a proud poet-prophet being reborn from the ashes of Urizen, as a revolutionary Blake seems to suggest. Coleridge is much more subtle in relating the poet to his constitutive Bible. He understands that this Bible is also a *relative* object rather than simply an object; for the poet or writer to relate to this Bible is to imaginatively construe a relation caught up in the productive imagination. What does this mean for the dance between poet and poetic Bible?

Coleridge’s theory of poetic imagination has been widely commented upon and dissected with scholars reaching a variety of conclusions.¹⁷⁵ For my purposes, I want to note how interpretations of Coleridge’s theory place the poet and poetic Bible in relation and continue to trace this in different manifestations of biblical authority.

Coleridge’s outlining of how he believes the imagination to operate is worth unpacking:

The IMAGINATION then, I consider either as primary or secondary. The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary Imagination I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the *kind* of its agency, and differing only in *degree*, and in the *mode* of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (*as objects*) are fixed and dead.¹⁷⁶

174 Davidson, “S. T. Coleridge,” p. 418. My emphasis.

175 See Katherine Wheeler’s introductory section in her extended essay, “Coleridge’s Theory of Imagination: a Hegelian Solution to Kant?,” in *The Interpretation of Belief: Coleridge, Schleiermacher and Romanticism*, ed. David Jasper (London: Macmillan Press, 1986).

176 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “Extract from *Biographia Literaria*, chapter 13; Vol I,” in *The Romantic Imagination: A Casebook*, ed. John Spencer Hill (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1977), p. 38. Emphasis in original.

For Coleridge, the imagination is not a passive mirror-mind of nature, receiving external sense impressions; it is an *a priori* necessity of perception and one could not cross Locke's abyss between thought and existence without it. But there is no abyss for Coleridge—the imagination always attempts a unifying process “insisting upon the interactive, non-subjective nature of experience, such that ‘reality’ is understood to reside neither in an absolute subject nor in the object, but in the experienced interaction between the two.”¹⁷⁷ As creative poet and philosopher, Coleridge “read Kant as having elaborated systematically in the *Logic* the (itself synthetic) idea that thought or reason is in its nature *both* analytic and synthetic.”¹⁷⁸ On this model, reason acts by synthesizing outward experience through categories that both inform and enable experience and perception, informed themselves by prior experience-become-knowledge. There is no need for an external given ‘object’. Mind, then, is not separate from nature or world; “It is not inherently dualistic, but rather is distinguishable only upon analysis; synthesis must reunite the analysed elements to describe experience intelligibly.”¹⁷⁹

In terms of the subject-object split, especially if we simplistically view the poet as a subject acting upon the Bible as object, there is more to be said. Coleridge views the imagination as a *vital* and animating power, able to conceive of Holy Writ, freed from the objectifying element of his sense of Bibliolatry, coming to life and standing on its feet. As he writes, Kant, Descartes, Locke, and Spinoza all make the mistake, of “a pure independent Object—in assuming a Substance beyond the I; of which therefore the I *could* only be a modification.”¹⁸⁰ He does not want the ‘I’ to simply be a mirror or modification of an external substance, a far too passive position for the creative writer in which to find himself. The grounding principle of philosophic and creative method must be found therefore

neither in object nor subject taken separately . . . it must be found in that which is neither subject nor object exclusively, but which is the identity of both . . . This principle . . . manifests itself in the SUM or I AM; which I shall hereafter . . . express, by words spirit, self, and self-consciousness.¹⁸¹

177 Wheeler, “Coleridge’s Theory of Imagination: a Hegelian Solution to Kant?,” pp. 17–18.

178 Ibid., p. 20.

179 Ibid., p. 21.

180 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E. L. Griggs, 6 vols., vol. 4 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956–71), p. 849. Qtd., Wheeler, “Coleridge’s Theory of Imagination: a Hegelian Solution to Kant?,” p. 22.

181 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1907), pp. 182–3. Qtd. Wheeler, “Coleridge’s Theory of Imagination: a Hegelian Solution to Kant?,” p. 23.

Subjects and objects of knowledge arise in the same moment of experience or self-consciousness, “that ‘unity of apperception’, [that] can properly be called a subject in the process of knowledge; but it must equally be called an object, for it makes itself its own object through its categories.”¹⁸²

In Coleridge’s thought we can discern the outlines of a ‘Romantic’ means of engaging with the Enlightenment Bibles, particularly in its ‘poetic’ form. He moves in that hyphenated space between Enlightenment-Romanticism that Walter Lowe identifies as a key aspect in understanding ‘modernity’. His understanding of Imagination also overcomes the populist notions of Romantic idealism versus Enlightenment reason. Imagination is “reason embodied, manifested or made finite: that is, imagination *is* the reason individualised into a finite perceiving mind . . . [and] Nature *and* imagination, as reason individualised into relative object and relative subject, both inhere within experience and reason itself, not one within and one without.”¹⁸³

Poetry for Coleridge, then, becomes that space of synthetic reason to exercise its ‘esemplastic’ power. He coins this term in an attempt to create an English word that echoes the nuances of Schelling’s *Einbildungskraft*.¹⁸⁴ This power occurs when the poet,

described in *ideal* perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other, according to their relative worth and dignity. He diffuses a tone and spirit of unity, that blends, and (as it were) *fuses*, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination. This power, first put in action by the will and understanding . . . reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities [. . .].¹⁸⁵

For Graham Davidson, this is why “Coleridge’s reading of the Bible is so hugely engaged: simultaneously he is testing what he finds there against the ideas of Reason, and allowing the Bible to bring those ideas to life in him; and though he realizes that not every event in the Bible will be established as fact, a

182 Wheeler, “Coleridge’s Theory of Imagination: a Hegelian Solution to Kant?,” p. 23.

183 Ibid., p. 33.

184 “A term that includes both the creative and poetic faculty and ‘cosmic intuition’ (*Anschauung*)—the power by which reality is perceived.” Prickett, *Words and The Word: Language, Poetics and Biblical Interpretation*, p. 143.

185 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “Extract from *Biographia Literaria*, Chapter 14; Vol 2,” in *The Romantic Imagination: A Casebook*, ed. John Spencer Hill (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1977), p. 40.

religion without a factual history is no religion. It is a difficult position to adopt, and easily unsettled.”¹⁸⁶

However, in keeping with Coleridge’s opposition to life-denying objectification, including of factual Scriptural history, he might sit more lightly to the meaning of the ‘fact’ than is given credit for in our contemporary understanding of the meaning of the term. The OED gives the word its origins in the Latin *factum*, the neuter past-participle of *facere* ‘do’, offering an ‘original’ sense of “a thing done, or performed, making it cognate with ‘feat’—a use that had persisted alongside the later meaning until the beginning of the nineteenth century. So far from denoting objectivity, this original meaning was essentially participatory. A ‘fact’ was something *made* by human agency.”¹⁸⁷ With this in mind, Coleridge’s theory of the imagination as ‘reason reasoning’ allows both analysis and synthesis to work creatively in perceiving experience and text. The ‘facts’ of Scriptural history then become

the living *educts* of the Imagination; of that reconciling and mediatory power, which incorporating the Reason in Images of the Sense, and organizing (as it were) the flux of the Senses by the permanence and self-circling energies of the Reason, gives birth to a system of symbols, harmonious in themselves, and consubstantial with the truths, of which they are the *conductors* [. . .]. Hence . . . The Sacred Book is worthily intitled *the WORD OF GOD*.¹⁸⁸

Coleridge can then state succinctly that ‘Religion is: Ideas contemplated as Facts’ and warn that “a hunger-bitten and idea-less philosophy naturally produces a starveling and comfortless religion.”¹⁸⁹

However, we have danced full-circle and returned to the critique of Coleridge made by Patricia Yaeger. Just as Coleridge is at his most celebratory of the creative, dynamic and innovative imagination, even dabbling in some deconstructive poses (‘the imagination . . . dissolves, diffuses, dissipates in order to recreate’),

186 Davidson, “S. T. Coleridge,” p. 418.

187 Prickett, *Words and The Word: Language, Poetics and Biblical Interpretation*, p. 192.

188 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “extract from *The Statesman’s Manual* (1816),” in *The Romantic Imagination: A Casebook*, ed. John Spencer Hill (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1977), p. 41.

189 *Ibid.*, p. 42.

his theory of language, especially as it is developed in his later writing, is comparatively static, the reflex of a metaphysical world-view. Coleridge's continuing insistence that what lies below the range of consciousness is not inscribable, that it represents a limit which marks the beginning of God's inscriptive powers and the ending of man's, differs sharply from Derrida's description of the limit as threshold and of writing as *angustia*, as an activity of necessary and impossible choice.¹⁹⁰

This narrowing, this ultimate reliance on the universal Word of God over the dead letter of the potentially bibliolatrous textual existence of 'Bible', the desire to be played, sung, voiced is part of "the Romantic gesture, which posits itself as a radical break with the past, [and which] is, in light of Derrida's critique of logocentrism, less a break from an errant past than a repetition and intensification of the very error."¹⁹¹ For Yaeger and Lowe, Coleridge's desire to decline the reification of subject-object relations between experience and perception and to allow imaginative reason its esemplastic powers is still to be in thrall to a Living and 'present' Word that does not bear the anguish of textuality and its overflowing signification.¹⁹² Whether this is entirely true for Coleridge is hard to say as he himself seems to follow such fluid movements between creative act or 'feat' and submission to the Divine harpist. But the questions of the family relations between Romanticism and Postmodernism will arise again in the next chapter. The turn to the poetic retelling's textuality will foreground the 'anguish of writing' in both poetry and biblical criticism, even as, following Coleridge, I argue for a more nuanced sense of the poetic imagination in reading 'Bible'. For now, I shall leave Coleridge sitting by the *lacuna*, the lake or loch into which flow the two streams of the 'historical-critical' and 'poetic' Bibles—"for even the Bible is but the Pool of Bethesda, of no avail till the Angel, whom angels and archangels worship by the working of his Holy Spirit in the human spirit, troubles the waters, before stagnant to the inward eye."¹⁹³

190 Yaeger, "Coleridge, Derrida, and the Anguish of Writing," p. 92.

191 Lowe, "Christianity and Anti-Judaism," p. 116.

192 For Lowe, the Romantic poet-prophet's denunciation of the "marks of reification . . . a credulous penchant for the literal; an attachment to the dead letter; refusal to hear the living Word; adherence to form and institution; resistance to the spirit; subservience to the law" are all "essential elements of anti-Judaism." Ibid.

193 Coleridge, *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, p. 580.

The Authority of the Cultural Bible

Up until this point, I have been tracing how different manifestations and performances of biblical authority surround the process of reading and studying real Bibles. Certain scholarly manoeuvres offered a new form of authority; these were texts that could hone the skills of the new philologists and historians. There were also attempts to affirm the ‘reasonableness’ of the Scriptures through proving a text’s congruence with scientific realism. This combined critical acumen could maintain ‘Bible’ as a highly regarded and authoritative text, protected from excessive and divisive theological use through universally applicable reason. Another line of approach was to assign sections of the Bible to the work of inspired poets which were authoritative and true because of the sublime and artful *writing* by which the message was conveyed.

However, the very proliferation of different authorities in which to embed ‘Bible’ demonstrates modernity’s secularizing pressures. Theology or ecclesiastical interpretation no longer held sway. As Jonathan Sheehan highlights, “no longer tied to God’s Word, the Enlightenment Bible became authoritative by virtue of its connection and relevance to human morality, aesthetics, and history. Instead of theology, *culture* would be the new rock atop which the legitimacy of the Bible was built.”¹⁹⁴ Although simplistic secularization narratives are now widely under question, Sheehan makes the important observation that, “for modern society, secularization always is and always must be incomplete.”¹⁹⁵ As part of its telling of itself, secularization must always be in the ascendancy and on the verge of defeating its ‘other’, namely religion. Within biblical studies this manifests itself in continuing discussions over confessional and non-confessional approaches to the texts; should ‘believers’ be able to operate ‘critically’ in a professional body such as the Society of Biblical Literature? Should theology have any bearing over the use of these texts? These questions will become relevant once again in the next chapter but it is evident that these questions are rooted in the complex machinations of differing authorities engendered by the Enlightenment Bible.

At this point, I want to look at the celebrations and commentary on the place of the King James Bible especially from 2011, its 400th anniversary year. Doing so will demonstrate some of the outworkings of Sheehan’s idea of a ‘cultural’ Bible and also show how the ‘poetic’ Bible has been one of the main foundation stones on which to build such a celebrated text.

¹⁹⁴ Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture*, p. xiv. My emphasis.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

*The 400th Anniversary of the King James Bible: The Cringes of
Creating and Celebrating a Cultural Bible*

When Sheehan describes the fulfilment of the project of the Enlightenment Bible as a detheologised Bible, surviving within the matrix of ‘culture’,¹⁹⁶ the Bible’s authority comes to be understood as something central to a European heritage, not least because of the huge intellectual endeavours that had taken place to try and ensure that it remained relevant and mobile through such radical ideological changes. In Germany and England, Bibles had become pieces of national literature; the Lutheran translation of 1545, even after the many years of historical-criticism and scholarship poured out upon the biblical manuscripts was still the German translation of choice, all other Bibles being seen as mere variations subordinated to this great vernacular cornerstone. The emphasis on Luther’s high literary style in creating the ‘poetic’ Bible ensured that his Bible could now become the foundation of a new sense of German national literature, a Book that demonstrated the sublime poetics of the German language, distanced again from both Hebrew language and Jewishness. In a similar way to the King James Version in England, these ‘folk-Bibles’ are the ones which people buy as christening gifts, hear read on the radio or at public events, most often during a period of national mourning, or the ones from which snatches of a particular biblical story or image are remembered. As Robert Carroll notes, “it is as an object of desire and a thing of delight for every consumer wishing to possess one that the Bible owes much of its appeal today as a commodity in modern times . . . it is essentially as a consumer good in a commodity culture that the Bible *now* flourishes in contemporary society.”¹⁹⁷ In the current celebrations though, there is a much more developed and subtle sense of the kjv as a cultural commodity; that of literary authority. In this direct link to the authority of the ‘poetic’ Bible I have discussed above, there are not many respondents who would agree with Carroll referring to it as a “*plonkingly awful translation*.”¹⁹⁸

My main point of reference for this brief analysis is the King James Bible Trust Website that displays many interesting aspects of the thinking behind such a project. Much of the emphasis is on how this Bible is the ‘book that changed the world’ and the most widely printed English language book of all

196 Ibid., p. 220.

197 Robert P. Carroll, “Lower Case Bibles: Commodity Culture and the Bible,” in *Biblical Studies/Cultural Studies: The Third Sheffield Colloquium*, ed. J. Cheryl Exum and Stephen D. Moore (Sheffield Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), p. 51.

198 Ibid., p. 67.

time. The mission statement is particularly pertinent both in what it says and what is left unsaid. The Trust's main aims are to:

Reflect the global importance of the King James Bible and the role it has played in spreading the English language around the world.

Promote events and celebrations throughout 2011 to ensure that as many people as possible can encounter the King James Bible by the year's end.

The Trust, an education and arts Trust, will highlight and debate the significant contribution that the King James Bible continues to make.

Fundamentally the trust is here to leave a lasting legacy for future generations, by ensuring that this great work of literature and learning is still read and taught in years to come.¹⁹⁹

My intention is not to undermine these efforts; indeed, I believe that it is important to access and assess the King James Bible as just that type of 'Bible' that lives on in a supposedly 'secular' society, and to look at how it is embedded in national identity and post-theological modes of authority.

So, firstly, the KJV is positioned as the fertile promulgator of the English language that is presented here in neutral terms, eliding the complexities of the Empire-building and missionary work involved in keeping this Bible mobile. Secondly, there is a quest to ensure as many encounters between people and the KJV as possible; is there a sniff of theology here? A Pietistic impulse for the individual soul to meet the Word? Although, there is no stipulation as to what type of encounter this might be, the following aim signifies that any encounter will be embedded in an educational or art-based medium. The final aim of leaving a lasting legacy to ensure that the KJV continues to live on suggests that, without such a trust, the KJV will finally 'give up the ghost', perhaps not as fit for survival as the Trust might hope. A little research into the Board of Patrons and Trustees shows H.R.H. the Prince of Wales as Patron with the Rt. Revd. and Rt. Hon. Richard Chartres, Bishop of London, as Vice-Patron. Thus, one of the original aims of the King James Bible, to continue to organize, legislate and shape the relationship between established Anglican Church and Monarchy seems to remain in place. For all intents and purposes, within the boundaries of the website, theological authority is diffused and only hinted

199 "Mission Statement," www.kingjamesbibletrust.org/about-us/mission-statement. Accessed 3rd January 2011.

at in these figureheads. However, in the extensive 'Events' section one can find a wide and varied worldwide response to the anniversary; in this sense it is perhaps a mite unfair to focus my attentions unduly on the Trust's website alone.

However, it maps so neatly onto Sheehan's index of the cultural Bible that I cannot leave it alone. We have here significant concerns for the KJV as a pedagogical text, as something that should be learnt and encountered in order to understand English literature.²⁰⁰ And it is the KJV's significance as a wellspring and influence over English literature in particular that is most telling. Following the creation of the 'poetic' Bible, human culture takes centre stage; religious authority is translated into literary culture as a normative function. Terry Eagleton famously argues that "if one were asked to provide a single explanation for the growth of English studies in the later nineteenth century, one could do worse than reply: 'the failure of religion.'"²⁰¹ If literature becomes salvific what better than a Bible that exhibits a 'universal' literariness, surely salvific literature at its best? Matthew Arnold is often brought in at this point in his attempts "in *Literature and Dogma* and *God and the Bible* to dissolve away the embarrassingly doctrinal bits of Christianity into poetically suggestive sonorities, so the pill of middle-class ideology was to be sweetened with the sugar of literature."²⁰² Indeed, Richard Chartres, Bishop of London, almost echoes Arnold in a radio interview at the launch for the KJV Bible Trust when he says that the KJV is a text to be heard, for "sonority is authority."²⁰³ The voice of the Divine has become Renaissance English. Richard Dawkins expresses his support for the King James Bible Trust's project by stating, without a hint of tongue-in-cheek, that "[...] not to know the King James Bible, is to be in some small way, barbarian."²⁰⁴ The final irony, and perhaps the apotheosis of the

200 Current Conservative Education Secretary Michael Gove, after being warned by Prime Minister David Cameron not to spend taxpayer's money on the project, managed to raise enough private donations to send a copy of the KJV to every state school in the country as part of the anniversary celebrations. The bibles, printed by Oxford University Press, feature the words 'Presented by the Secretary of State for Education' in gold on their spines. See Jessica Shepherd, "Michael Gove's King James Bible plan rescued by millionaire Tory donors", *The Guardian*, Tuesday 15 May 2012. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2012/may/15/michael-gove-king-james-bible>. Accessed 30th May 2013.

201 Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), p. 23.

202 Ibid.

203 Dennis Sewell, "Politics UK: King James Special," ed. Elaine Thomas (BBC World Service, Broadcast 31st December 2010).

204 "Richard Dawkins lends his support to The King James Bible Trust," www.kingjamesbibletrust.org/news/2010/02/19/richard-dawkins-lends-his-support-to-the-king-james-bible-trust. Accessed 13th February 2011.

'cultural Bible', is his firm resolve that "it is important that religion should not be allowed to hijack this cultural resource."²⁰⁵ Is there a cultural cringe going on here, the religious or theological finally becoming the literary and cultural, a sort of renewed and revived Bibliolatry?

A few decades prior to this year's celebration, the poetry journal *PN Review* published a special edition focussing on the 'Crisis for Cranmer and King James' with extensive petitions addressed to the church hierarchy, with many signatories especially from the literary world, including Alan Bennett, Iris Murdoch, William Golding, Philip Larkin, Sir John Betjeman, Frank Kermode, I. A. Richards and Michael Schmidt. The issue in question was the Church of England's gradual replacement of the King James Version with the New English Bible, and the 1662 Book of Common Prayer and liturgy, with broader, more up-to-date language and worship. That this was published in a magazine specifically aimed at a poetry reading audience is significant and many of the articles entrench the views that we now see in the 2011 celebrations. Guest editor David Martin wrote in his leader article,

Behind the thin guise of 'choice' the double crown of English faith and language is being hustled and shoved into the museum. And what loosens the keystone of these classic texts touches the whole arch of rhyme and imaginative reason. The common poetry of English life is now being abandoned, in church and school. This will be a national loss comparable to the wholesale destruction of our churches and cathedrals. Where the markers stood, there will be gaping holes filled with utilitarian disposables. Vast tracts of feeling and reference will be obliterated. Not merely some fifty pages of the Oxford Book of Quotations disappear but we shall lose an Atlantis of the mind. There will be and can be no replacement. So far as memory is concerned, we face a universal blank.²⁰⁶

This is stirring and polemical stuff and echoes Coleridge with the focus on how the Bible is caught up in cultivating an 'imaginative reason'. Throughout the special edition much is made of 'our common heritage' and domestic culture. Martin also argues that the New English Bible translators have misunderstood that "religion depends on what is known by heart, in the heart. What is not memorable cannot be fed upon 'in heart by faith with thanksgiving,'"²⁰⁷ a neo-Romantic theological statement by any other name. Ulrich Simon argues that one must memorize the KJV text—it "must circulate in one as does the blood,

205 Ibid.

206 David Martin, "Why Spit on Our Luck?," *PN Review* 6, no. 5 (1979): p. 1.

207 Ibid., p. 2.

reaching heart and brain and liver and sexual organs.”²⁰⁸ Anthony Burgess, reviewing the New International Version, described it as tasting of “chlorinated, not Jordan, water.”²⁰⁹

What is forgotten in all these attempts to cement the KJV as a kind ‘national literary classic’ is that the KJV’s history is a complex continuation of the political and ideological processes of Reformation and post-Reformation translation. It incorporated much of what had come before, including the work of William Tyndale and Miles Coverdale and was not a ‘new’ inaugural translation. David Crystal offers a helpful remedy to this simplistic affirmation of linguistic inauguration and comes to the conclusion that 257 biblical expressions have found their way into idiomatic English. He then breaks down the quantitative influence of the KJV by categorizing from which translations these might be sourced, concluding that, in fact, only 18 expressions are apparently unique to the KJV.²¹⁰

The work of the King James Bible Trust has returned us to the idea that the religious is essentially ‘poetic’ and that, to truly appreciate this form of the biblical texts, one must be schooled in our ‘common’ ground of literature and language. Whose Bible is this now? The Bible is not only literature in the sense that it exhibits literary qualities that might be analysed through style, tone, diction, and so on. It is also Literature in the sense of a national identity, language, and life.

I have argued that different Bibles contribute to the cultural and ideological sense of ‘Bible’; in a similar way, the King James Bible can be studied as literature but it also contributes greatly to the capitalization (in all senses of the word) of Literature. This Literature is an umbrella for those canonical texts that have become part of what John Guillory terms ‘cultural capital,’²¹¹ texts to which access is made available or denied through pedagogical systems. The KJV sits between biblical and literary canons, something that will become important in understanding how the biblical story of ‘Jacob’s struggle with the angel’ is accessed and retold. Interestingly, however, in both contemporary and older versions of these justifications of the KJV’s poetic and cultural authority, there is little discussion of *content* in mounting these defences. By a curious literary and cultural quirk, stories of the degradation of women, genocide, the horrors of crucifixion and the mysterious resurrection stories become pieces

208 Ulrich Simon, “As Others see the Problem,” *PN Review* 6, no. 5 (1979): p. 45.

209 *The Observer* 4 March, 1979.

210 David Crystal, *Begat: The King James Bible and the English Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 256–259.

211 John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

of a familiar ‘mental furniture’. Perhaps, again, as Philip Davies argued, we must be aware of the fact that “ancient authors, their texts, modern readers and academic scholarship are all in need of continual liberation from their own idolatry. And ‘the Bible’ is one of the greatest idols of modern times.”²¹²

Returning to Bethsada and Stirring the Pool

This chapter has explored how maintaining biblical authority from the Reformation onwards was a difficult and varied task, especially as Enlightenment-Romantic paradigms of thought began to erode the old certainties about the Bible’s theological utility. Free-thinking inquiry started to question how these texts could make such strange supernatural claims in light of what was deemed to be reasonable sense and analogy. For writers such as Anthony Collins, free-thinking was not necessarily a threat to Christian religion. All that was needed were the right tools to excise the “corrupt glosses, innovations and traditions”²¹³ which had made the texts so problematic. Behind these accretions would be a firm bedrock of reasonable, authentic, and enlightened Christian religion. The scriptures now had their own history rather than simply relaying divine history; the biblical narratives had become a series of fragmented and questionable documents, a book of problems rather than answers. This is where we saw the rise of biblical scholars, such as Johann Albrecht Bengel, who saw errors and corruption in the texts as signposts by which to pursue the traces of a purified, and thus more theologically meaningful, original text closer to the events it purported to describe. The type of Bible that was thus created had an authority built, not upon theology or Church doctrine, but on textual scholarship. Bible-as-Document is the meta-ideal by which such Bibles were and continue to be read. In defending the Bible from its detractors, such scholars had contributed an important facet to the ongoing project of the Enlightenment Bible—imagining the biblical texts as difficult, foreign, not to be trusted and only to be approached with the correct critical apparatus.

The other major facet I explored was the creation of the ideal of the poetic Bible. Robert Lowth’s *Lectures* were positioned as the wellspring of both facets, the historical-critical and the poetic, and it will be important to trace how these two streams eddy around contemporary biblical studies in the next

²¹² Davies, *Whose Bible is it Anyway?* p. 16.

²¹³ Collins, “Discourse of the Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion (1724), Chapters I, IV, V, VII (less paragraph 4), IX, X (extracted), XI,” p. 24.

chapter. For Lowth and Herder and the Romantics over which they had so much influence, the historical distances between the antiquated texts and contemporary life could be overcome by an appreciation of the universal, quasi-divine poetic genius evident in the ancient Hebrew poetry. This work set the scene for a new way of justifying the *experience* of reading a biblical text such as the book of Job; such a sublime and awesome poetry could do the work of a theodicy, overwhelming the reader and maintaining the authority of inspired biblical writing as a religious, political, and social device.

Blake responds to this construction of the poetic Bible through his visions of the poet-as-prophet and the prophet-as-poet. His sense of the 'Poetic Genius' at the root of biblical prophetic writing grants new authority to the poet, those few writers daring enough to heed the call to inhabit the world of the imagination, and, in so doing, bring about a revolution of the spirit. For Blake, Christian religion and its Bible, at its most authentic, is a profound poetry.

The Wordsworth of *The Lyrical Ballads* focuses on a pastoral simplicity, the language of the 'common man' which is akin to that of the earliest biblical poets who wrote naturally of their 'powerful feeling'. Again, poetry is viewed as the most primal and authentic language, the "image of man and nature . . . the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge . . . immortal as the heart of man."²¹⁴ Passionate *enthusiasm* allows the poet to glimpse the divine that permeates 'natural' and world events.

It is Coleridge, however, who offers one of the most complex responses to the poetic Bible. His arguments against the bibliolatry of an infallible scripture mark his attempts to find a space for the poet's creative response. Whilst not denying that some of the prophets might have been divinely inspired, he is keen to point out that these utterances have become recorded texts, and thus are "among the phenomena of the senses."²¹⁵ As such, they are available to the perceptive imagination of the poet who becomes a scribe through which the 'glorious panharmonicon' of the Bible might be heard. And yet, as we saw, Coleridge is also aware of how language and writing distances the divine, that even poetic mediation is hamstrung by its anguished limitations. He is caught between submitting to the poetic Bible, allowing it to process through his work, and being an active writer, utilizing the productive and participative poetic imagination as a form of hermeneutics.

Although qualified by an engagement with some poststructuralist thought on writing and interpretation, Coleridge's thinking will influence my analysis of contemporary poetic retellings of Jacob's 'Struggle with the Angel,' that scene

²¹⁴ Wordsworth, "Preface to Lyrical Ballads."

²¹⁵ Coleridge, *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*, p. 44.

he describes as a “perfect episode—a sort of parenthesis in the narrative.”²¹⁶ The next chapter traces how contemporary biblical criticism attempts to manage this Enlightenment-Romantic heritage through maintaining a separation between the aesthetic and the critical. Having outlined the two main ‘ideal types’ of biblical authority that contribute to a post-ecclesiastical Bible, a theme that will continue in importance throughout my argument, I shall begin to outline my position of a poetic postmodernism that ‘troubles the waters’ of biblical studies as it is currently constituted.

²¹⁶ Davidson, “S. T. Coleridge,” p. 419. Davidson quotes Coburn and Harding, eds., *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, p. 6198.

Biblical Studies and Postmodern Poetics; or, ‘Gentlemanly’ Readers Meet ‘Uncouth Hydra Readers’¹

Chapter one emphasized that whenever we come to read Bibles, these readings are bound up with a sense of certain types of ‘Bible’, the ideals in which the texts are embedded and which are mobile between different disciplines. In short, readerly possibilities are provoked and curtailed by the type of Bible that is both pre-conceived and then constituted by reading. This chapter continues to trace the mobility and malleability of ‘Bible’, how it is arrested by different reading methods, freed up and sent on its way by others, all the while remembering that readers are bound (*religare*) to re-read (*relegere*) and retell and, through this retelling, enter the contested space between biblical narratives and wider discourse, between the “the tale and the telling.”² This chapter tests those bindings and gradually shifts the focus from the types of Bible offered in the previous chapter to how different readers and writers on Bible are constituted in relation to the ways in which they handle biblical materials. This is a move toward theorizing poetic retellings without attempting to pronounce a final definition on the subject; as Mieke Bal highlights, “while groping to define, provisionally and partly, what a concept may *mean*, we gain insight into what it can *do*.”³ If poetic retellings of the Bible are more of a phenomenon than a firmly delineated genre (although these phenomena might display family resemblances), engaging with a number of different poetic examples will offer more insight into what they can *do* to our understandings of meaning production: what happens when a writer responds to biblical stories within the shifting contexts of Bible as discourse? What resonances and effects do such retellings have on current understandings of the relationships between literary studies, biblical studies and Theory? Do the phenomena of poetic retellings

1 See Moore and Sherwood, “Biblical Studies ‘after’ Theory: Onwards Towards the Past; Part Three: Theory in the First and Second Waves,” p. 205.

2 Jobling, Pippin, and Schleifer, “Introduction: A Short Course in Postmodernism for Bible Readers,” p. 5.

3 Mieke Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), p. 11.

offer biblical studies a neo-Coleridgean vision of “a *poetic approach as a possible hermeneutic improvement?*”⁴

Historical-philological scholarship as a way of guarding against pre-critical, uncritical, or overly tendentious readings (whether sceptical or ‘faithful’, confessional or non-confessional) will be a continuing theme that defines modern scholarship on Bible. Ideas about what is gathered under the signs of the ‘literary’ and the ‘historical’ between the disciplines mark my concerns here and it is through literary theory that these questions are channelled. Tracing some of the lines of the debate will then lead me into the next chapter where I shall offer an overview on how critical and philosophic thinking has defended itself against poetic overreading and imitation. This conflict between poet and philosopher/critic has a long heritage and will be examined to provide a context for why it is important to continue to play along these lines of tension, offering insights into how different disciplines constitute their parameters of legitimate knowledge and to argue for a knowing *poesis* to have a place at the table.

Theoretical Murmurs in Biblical Studies

If the first chapter characterized Bible as dancing between the disciplines, demonstrating its mobile nature from historical-critical (document) to poetic (literature) and back again, each dance step is changed and influenced by the space in which the dance is choreographed and the partners that are invited to participate. In order to provide a further backdrop to how I am theorizing the phenomenon of poetic retelling, I am using the work of Stephen D. Moore and Yvonne Sherwood. In an extended three-issue study in the journal *Biblical Interpretation*, they offer a detailed analysis of how critical/literary Theory was initially received in biblical studies and how the broad sweep of motivations and impulses collected under this term have fared.⁵

It is important to note that it is in literary studies in which critical theory first takes root in its university setting. Valentine Cunningham has noted the plurality that is contained within this contested term ‘Theory’, the genealogies of which hint at its diverse parentage. As he highlights, the conservative National Association of Scholars (an American grouping) define Literature

4 Davidson, “S. T. Coleridge,” p. 418. My emphasis.

5 The three extended essays first published in *Biblical Interpretation* have been subsequently published as Stephen D. Moore and Yvonne Sherwood, *The Invention of the Biblical Scholar: A Critical Manifesto* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011). This book was not available to me at the time of writing and so I quote from the journal versions of their work.

courses as postmodern if they use any of 115 keywords as identified by them, including such terms as, in alphabetical order: agency, AIDS, bodies, canonicity, decentred, Derrida, discourse, erotic, feminism, Foucault, Freud, gay, gaze, gendered, logocentric, maleness, otherness, queer, slavery, womanism and so on.⁶ Nonetheless, simply identifying these themes misses the point; they are already normal and normative within Literature and Cultural Studies. “Theory with a capital T,”⁷ approaches such as “Structuralism and Feminism and Marxism and Reader-Response and Psychoanalytic and Deconstruction and Poststructuralism and Postmodernism and New Historicism and Post-colonialism”⁸ are ubiquitous. As Cunningham understands it,

Theorists have indeed managed to pull off what is, by any standards, an astounding coup, or trick; [they] have managed to wedge together a great many various subjects, concerns, directions, impulses, persuasions and activities that are going on in and around literature, and squeeze them all under the one large sheltering canopy of ‘Theory’.⁹

Theory is, seemingly against its own postcolonial principles, “the greatest intellectual colonizer of all time.”¹⁰ While certainly not ubiquitous in biblical studies, Cunningham is especially scathing toward those biblical scholars who have been attracted to Theory:

Sadly, though, a lot of theorized Biblicists are as *beliebig* [random, arbitrary] as could be, and infected by the critical daftnesses, follies, and crimes, the sentimental political correctnesses, the neurotic and wishful sightings of oneself in the textual mirror, the canting repetitions about contentless, dehistoricized, utterly abysmal linguistics and textuality (founded in misreadings of Saussure and early Derrida, and flying in the face of Derrida’s protests) which have all flourished down the literary corridor.¹¹

6 Valentine Cunningham, “Theory? What Theory?,” in *Theory’s Empire: An Anthology of Dissent*, ed. Daphne Patai and Will H. Corral (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), pp. 24–25.

7 Ibid., p. 25.

8 Ibid., p. 27.

9 Ibid., pp. 27–28.

10 Ibid., p. 28.

11 Cunningham, “Bible Reading and/after Theory,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible*, ed. Michael Lieb, et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 662–663.

In particular, the postmodern focus on Jacob's Jabbok wrestling match "[with its *embarrass/blockages*] stands for the embarrassingly aporetic text, its wrestling hero an emblem of the discomfited, cheated reader/interpreter: Barthesian models straight-away seized on in the Theory world."¹² My work circles Gen. 32:22–32 with these 'embarrassments' in mind, but does not settle on the conclusion of a cheated reader or interpreter. It does argue, however, that the narrative's aporia has resulted in a history of diverse retelling—it is the *process* and the *product* of the poetic retelling that foregrounds how meaning is legitimized between the different disciplines that read the same biblical material. Even though the 'Enlightenment Bible' demonstrates a process of defamiliarization and separation between biblical texts, readers and specialized disciplines (and sometimes attempts to overcome these splits), the practices situated under the broad umbrella of Theory, enable us to focus on *reading and writing* as practices that bring certain ideals of Bible to the fore; 'The Bible' does not exist *per se*, but readings and writings on Bible do and it is these readings and rewritings that sustain the cultural afterlives¹³ of biblical texts.

Contra Cunningham's conclusion that "Biblicists have become regular buyers of sexy ideas at the Theory-monger's brothel,"¹⁴ Moore and Sherwood outline why some biblical scholars have been so attracted to Theory. They highlight that if

the original project of the Enlightenment Bible consolidated under four fundamental headings—philology, history, aesthetics, and morality—biblical scholarship soon abandoned the aesthetic and the ethical. Theory has revived the aesthetic, in the form of literary criticism, and also, most importantly, the moral, in the form of feminist biblical criticism, ideological criticism, and other approaches that directly engage the ethics or ideologies of biblical texts.¹⁵

¹² Ibid., p. 653.

¹³ See Yvonne Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). My first encounter with this increasingly widespread critical term was in Sherwood's book and I will be utilizing it, and extending it, modifying its implicit chronology, in the following chapters.

¹⁴ Cunningham, "Bible Reading and/after Theory," p. 651.

¹⁵ Moore and Sherwood, "Biblical Studies 'after' Theory: Onwards Towards the Past; Part Three: Theory in the First and Second Waves," pp. 214–215.

As we shall see in the final chapter of this book, I argue that it is exactly this focus on the aesthetic and the moral or ethical that is developed in reading poetic retellings of Gen. 32, especially around the performativity of male bodies, both divine and human.

However, where anti-Theorists in literary studies have protested against the multiple deaths of multiple authors, arguing that the “living, beating heart of authorial sensibility and creativity needs defending from poststructuralist Theories of language that would dissolve all formally autonomous agents, not least Authors, in an acid-bath of textuality, intertextuality, semioticity and undecidability,”¹⁶ in biblical studies, by contrast, “Theory can hardly be said to have risen to sufficiently Luciferian heights to undergo any meaningful fall.”¹⁷ Moore and Sherwood reference Daphne Patai and Will H. Corral’s *Theory’s Empire: An Anthology of Dissent* to demonstrate the backlash that suggests an ‘after theory’¹⁸ movement in literary studies. Patai and Corral complain that in their broad field of literary criticism even the necessarily limiting term ‘literary’ has been absented from the grandiose claims of much theoretical work and that “the rhetoric of Theory has been successful in gaining the moral and political high ground, and those who question it do so at their peril.”¹⁹ The boot is certainly on the other foot in biblical studies; the reading methods that are collected under the term ‘historical criticism’ still occupy the high ground and organize much of the work that is done.

16 Stephen D. Moore and Yvonne Sherwood, “Biblical Studies ‘after’ Theory: Onwards Towards the Past; Part One: After ‘after Theory’, and Other Apocalyptic Conceits,” *Biblical Interpretation* 18, no. 1 (2010): p. 18.

17 Ibid., p. 4.

18 As Terry Eagleton writes in another memorable turn of phrase and explaining his reasons as to why we are writing through a time ‘after theory’, “Postmodernism seems at times to behave as though the classical bourgeoisie is alive and well, and thus finds itself living in the past. It spends much of its time assailing absolute truth, objectivity, timeless moral values, scientific inquiry and a belief in historical progress. It calls into question the autonomy of the individual, inflexible social and sexual norms, and the belief that there are firm foundations to the world. Since all of these values belong to a bourgeois world on the wane, this is rather like firing off irascible letters to the press about the horse-riding Huns or marauding Carthaginians who have taken over the Home Counties.” Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (London: Allen Lane, 2003), p. 17. However, as this book is marked by a constant movement between disciplines, it is important to note that this sense of ‘Theory’ having exhausted itself in one discipline does not necessarily mean that within biblical studies it might not still be worth ‘firing off irascible letters’ about just those ‘bourgeois values’ that Eagleton lists.

19 Daphne Patai and Will H. Corral, “Introduction,” in *Theory’s Empire*, p. 3.

In tracing the slow movement of Theory into biblical studies, Moore and Sherwood highlight how Theory was initially received as a new impetus; “scholars exhausted with endlessly wringing out tired old problems and tweaking tired old solutions could acquire entire new research agendas simply by switching methods.”²⁰ These switches had to curtail some of the excesses of what might be seen as the overtly *literary* roots of Theory by transferring such practices into methodological ‘isms’, for example, “reader response criticism, ‘deconstructionism’, ideological criticism, and other vaguely postmodernist ‘-isms’ [which] helped to meet the intensified demand for new methods and approaches caused by wear and tear (through overuse) on the old historical-critical machine.”²¹ These match perfectly the ‘ubiquitous’ terminology of Theory that Cunningham identifies above.

However, to overemphasize the novelty of Theory in biblical studies is to also seriously oversimplify the three-way movement between literary criticism, Theory, and biblical studies. The histories of these relationships form complex networks with many interdisciplinary nuances informing the buzzing lines from which my analysis of poetic retellings is drawn. Many disciplines, formally estranged from one another, seem to be turning back to their former dialogue or dancing partners, albeit changed by the advancing years, and not always without important conflicts and doubts about the forms the relationships should take. As Hent de Vries has identified (following some of Jacques Derrida’s later work), there has been a ‘turn to religion’ in philosophy,²² troubling the waters of both, and, as Heather Walton and others continue to explore, theology’s turn to the seemingly rejuvenating powers of art and literature has to cope with imaginative writing as “the not true, the not so and the not yet”²³ in a relationship that can place “a stress upon alterity rather than complementarity.”²⁴

Depending on how one writes such epistemological genealogies, one can cast one discipline as originator of, or indebted to, the other. From one perspective there are suggestions that “the modern discipline of ‘literary criticism’ has developed largely out of ancient traditions of biblical interpretation

20 Moore and Sherwood, “Biblical Studies ‘after’ Theory: Onwards Towards the Past; Part Three: Theory in the First and Second Waves,” p. 192.

21 Ibid., p. 194.

22 Hent de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1999).

23 Heather Walton, “When Love Is Not True: Literature and Theology after Romance,” in *Literature and Theology: New Interdisciplinary Spaces*, ed. Heather Walton (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), p. 51.

24 Ibid., p. 43.

[...].”²⁵ For its part, Theory is often labelled as *literary* theory and then gradually enters biblical studies from its near neighbour and progeny. In turn, as we have seen, theology is distanced from biblical criticism under the pressure of the Enlightenments and edges into literature, in, for example, Romantic poetry as it becomes a kind of replacement theopoetics.

As an example of the impulses that impinge on disciplinary formation, Terry Eagleton suggests that the rise of a late nineteenth century English studies centred around a newly demarcated aesthetic domain known as ‘Literature’ was due to the “failure of religion.”²⁶ In line with this, we have already seen in the previous chapter how those involved in the fragmenting project of maintaining the Bible’s authority began to recast it as canonical Literature, capable of saving souls through its sublime poetics, over against the problematic historicizing and rationalizing of biblical events. Although a history of literary criticism cannot detain us here, the literary humanism that eventually evolved from the prior work done in biblical criticism and hermeneutics (again, Lowth and Herder are key sources for both) and situated in the modern period, “substituted [literary criticism] for revelation as the guarantee of authenticity.”²⁷ Eventually formulated in the intellectual persuasions of the New Criticism, and demonstrated in the journal *Scrutiny*, the turn to the literary artefact

stressed the centrality of rigorous critical analysis, a disciplined attention to the ‘words on the page’. [The New Critics] urged this not simply for technical or aesthetic reasons, but because it had the closest relevance to the spiritual crisis of modern civilisation. Literature was important not only in itself, but because it encapsulated creative energies that were everywhere on the defensive in modern ‘commercial’ society.²⁸

This emphasis on the literary as the last space left for authors to manifest their creative energies tends to conjoin or repress the religious with the aesthetic, something that we have also seen the Romantics enact in their appropriation of the biblical. According to Moore and Sherwood, this can also be discerned where “Biblical literary criticism, in some of its more hyperbolic manifestations, has taken the form of deflected worship, a translation of the sacred into

25 David Jasper, “Literary Readings of the Bible,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*, ed. John Barton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 21.

26 Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, p. 20.

27 Prickett, *Words and The Word: Language, Poetics and Biblical Interpretation*, p. 43.

28 Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, pp. 27–28.

the aesthetic.”²⁹ This ‘deflected worship’ can also be seen in some of Theory’s turn to religion, although this tends to be less of a deflection and more of an inflection, in language, towards the alterity and otherness of textual traces. As Kevin Hart notes, “as the negative theologian longs for the God beyond Being, that is, who is beyond all philosophical determinations of Being, so the literary theorist searches for a literature and a critical vocabulary that escape or thwart philosophical categories.”³⁰

However, according to Patai and Corral, who use religiously inflected language in their own dissent against Theory, this move does not worship literary value in the way that they think it should. As they argue, in their attempt to “redeem the study of literature as an activity worth pursuing in its own right,”³¹ they have been frustrated by the fact that “the inevitability of Theory persists as an article of faith, and the proselytizing spirit nonetheless continues as well. The result has been the publication of ever more reiterative and derivative theories.”³² Theory has become an inverse idolatry.

Each disciplinary approach creates its own origins and, when the object of study is shared, each discipline vies for epistemological supremacy. In a discipline such as biblical studies, always haunted by the spectres of religion, Theory suggests to many biblical scholars a return to irrationality (even if this can be labelled ‘a-theological’), a questioning and overturning of some of biblical studies most cherished *critical* epistemologies.³³ We turn and turn about in

29 Moore and Sherwood, “Biblical Studies ‘after’ Theory: Onwards Towards the Past; Part Three: Theory in the First and Second Waves,” p. 196.

30 Hart, “The Poetics of the Negative,” p. 287. For a critical view of how this move has been enacted through appropriations and misreadings of Derrida’s work as a kind of messianic turn to negative theology, see Arthur Bradley, “Derrida’s God: A Genealogy of the Theological Turn,” *Paragraph* 29, no. 3 (2006).

31 Patai and Corral, “Introduction,” p. 13.

32 Ibid., p. 6.

33 Some key parameters of this debate can be seen in the recent extensive discussion on the Society of Biblical Literature’s Website (<http://www.sbl-site.org/membership/farewell.aspx>, accessed 21st May 2011), provoked by an article written by Ronald S. Hendel, “Farewell to S.B.L.: Faith and Reason in Biblical Studies,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 36, no. 4 (July/August 2010). In it, he argues that the SBL “has changed its position on the relationship between faith and reason in the study of the Bible” (p. 28). According to Hendel, in order to raise revenue after splitting with the American Academy of Religion (AAR) and the American Schools of Oriental Research (ASOR), the SBL “has reached out to evangelical and fundamentalist groups, promising them a place within the SBL meeting” (p. 28). Changing the mission statement from stimulating ‘critical investigation of the classical biblical literatures’ to an aim to ‘foster biblical scholarship’ means that “critical enquiry—that is to say, reason—has been deliberately deleted as a criterion for the SBL.

this dance between disciplinary motivations. Where Theory has been seen as dehumanising literary studies, dissolving authors, authorities and texts, and in biblical studies as dissolving the guardrails for a legitimate rational exegesis and raising the ever-present fears of ‘going too far’, Moore and Sherwood go on to note that

[i]n a final twist of irony, the turn to Theory for at least some of us in biblical studies actually had much to do with an attempted ‘humanisation’ of our discipline. Our first attraction to Theory arose at least in part from a desire to talk about ‘larger human themes’ in our work (even if we never used that language, even to ourselves)—themes such as bodies and embodiment, pain and pleasure, sex and death—but also more alien themes such as ecstasy and mysticism. We were drawn to overtly arational, parareligious, poststructuralist meditations and to deconstructive flirtations with negative theology—the tantalisingly impossible quest for transcendence in the determinedly low-ceilinged space of Theory. In an interesting twist, it felt like blasphemy in biblical studies—a field that for all its theological veneer tends to aspire to ‘rational’ and scientific modes of argumentation—to venture into the poetic and mystical regions of these religious texts.³⁴

The views of creationists, snake-handlers and faith-healers now count among the kinds of Biblical scholarship that the society seeks to foster” (p. 74). The debate that followed on the SBL forum is a fascinating snapshot of how different scholars envisage the biblical studies enterprise, featuring input from Philip Davies and Larry Hurtado, amongst others. James Crossley makes a further important point in the biblical blogosphere, when he argues, whilst not disagreeing with Hendel *per se*, that “constructing a stark opponent [i.e. snake-handlers and faith-healers] ends up being important in creating a specific academic identity and perpetuating certain trends” maintaining “the credibility of the center”. In effect, ‘fundamentalists and evangelicals’ “may find the rational liberal center important in maintaining their credibility, [whilst] the liberal rational center may too find that ‘fundamentalists’ and evangelicals are important in maintaining their cultural value and intellectual credibility.” Crossley asks then whether “we are really dealing with a love that dare not speak its name.” James Crossley, “Does the Center need an Extreme?,” *The Bible and Interpretation* (June 2010), www.bibleinterp.com/opeds/centre357929.shtml. I leave this discussion at this point as the debate is wide-ranging and intrinsically interminable, another important factor in maintaining a discipline that Hector Avalos has provocatively described as “an elite leisure pursuit called ‘biblical studies’, which is subsidized through churches, academic institutions, and taxpayers.” Hector Avalos, “The Ideology of the Society of Biblical Literature and the Demise of an Academic Profession,” *S.B.L. Forum* (April 2006), <http://sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleID=520>.

34 Moore and Sherwood, “Biblical Studies ‘after’ Theory: Onwards Towards the Past; Part One: After ‘after Theory’, and Other Apocalyptic Conceits,” p. 21.

This is key for my own work and for why I am interested in Theory as a way of bringing the poetics of reading and rewriting back into the 'science' of biblical studies. Although this could be seen as a continuation of the Coleridgean/Arnoldian scheme of saving a literary classic, I am reading and writing always within and after Theory, a different, ironized,³⁵ vein of thought and practice. Part of this is to acknowledge, with Cunningham, that for all Theory's seeming novelty and radical nature especially in biblical studies (for 'its' nature is always dependent on framing and practice), from Plato to Derrida,

there's only ever been up for critical grabs, for theory, a simple trio of knowable, thinkable zones, corresponding to the three components of the basic model of linguistic communication. There is always, and only ever, a sender, a message, and a receiver—a writer, a text, a reader—the act of writing, the thing written, the reading of that written thing . . . Only three; but a mighty three for all that.³⁶

This Big Three have always been a part of biblical and literary studies and, with Theory as a lens, what counts is how each of these elements is viewed and constituted (or dissolved). I want to continue to suggest movement and arrest as key to this debate. So here we have a sense of orbits, not around static planetary bodies such as The (capitalized) Bible but as readerly and writerly possibilities circling and constituting the different types of Bible that we have explored thus far, namely the 'historical-critical Bible' and the 'poetic Bible'. If one's discipline tends towards myopia in its treatment of one of the Big Three (e.g. traditionally 'the receiver' or reader in biblical studies) then a change of perspective is offered by lenses from another discipline. However, it is crucial to note with Cunningham that "criticism always claims newness; it wants to be new [. . .]. But criticism has never ever been quite new; and the history we're dealing with is all about swings and roundabouts, about the Big Three items

35 I am using this term 'ironized' following Daniel Boyarin's use of the sense when he highlights how different modes of reading, in his case, midrash and rabbinic interpretation, "can have much to teach us about the different options that hermeneutics can take and help us to ironize our own reading practices." Daniel Boyarin, "Midrash and the Magic Language': Reading without Logocentrism," in *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments*, ed. Yvonne Sherwood and Kevin Hart (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2005), p. 321. The detours through other reading and writing practices, by taking the winding paths of Theory, ensures that the Romantic and Arnoldian view of the bible as a literary classic embedded within a cultural humanism is also always problematized.

36 Cunningham, "Theory? What Theory?" p. 35.

going around and coming around, again and again, in a process of constant reaction, resurrection, rereading, repositioning, revision.”³⁷

Although Cunningham’s Big Three are useful to think with, I also want to refer to the ways in which important theoretical concepts shape how the relationships between author, text, and reader/writer have been imagined. These factors exert a gravitational pull on these relationships, organising them in certain ways. Having briefly mentioned some of the nuances of the genealogies that animate Bible’s movement between literary studies, Theory and biblical studies, I now want to move into a focus on how the ‘literary’ and the ‘historical’ are used by different scholars in their attempts to arrest the meaning of biblical texts. This analysis will instil more of the necessary ‘anguish of writing’ in a biblical studies that has always been obsessed with *texts* but not necessarily open to Theory’s obsessions with textuality and writing.

Arresting the Texts; how are the ‘Literary’ and ‘Historical’ Deployed in Biblical Studies?

In this section, I want to trace how critical legitimacy is defined and defended in biblical studies by continuing to explore the ideas that have clustered around the motifs of the ‘literary’ and the ‘historical’. As we have seen in chapter one, there is a seeming paradox between the advent of the Higher Criticism and the rise of the Bible as an aesthetic model, with Robert Lowth’s *Lectures* a well-spring for both tendencies.³⁸ Lowth’s focus on the poetics, the literary constructions evident in the texts, serve to both emphasize historical distance and difference and, at the same time, to appeal to a higher sublime poetic authority. His warning of forming an erroneous judgement based on ‘rashly estimating all things by our standard’ became one of the fundamental laws of the Higher Criticism. John Barton’s book *The Nature of Biblical Criticism* exemplifies the tensions between the literary and the historical-critical that are *the* paradox running through all scholarly biblical criticism. This is one of the paradoxes that, I argue, keeps the Bible living on and offers biblical studies itself the space for its voluminous folds and huge professional meetings. Emphasizing one’s own approach to the Big Three—writer, text, reader—whilst denying the validity of another’s approach is what offers a kind of surface tension, a way of defining and creating the *shibboleth* of one’s boundaries and commitments. I want to look at how Barton characterizes the ‘nature’ of biblical criticism in

37 Ibid., p. 37.

38 Prickett, “Introduction,” pp. 315–16.

order to continue to explore the surface tensions that both create types of Bible and inform what readers and writers may then construct or make (*poesis*) in their approaches.

The Nature of Biblical Criticism and the Pharmakon of Writing

Barton is keen to move away from the inherent baggage of 'the historical-critical method', seeing it as alluding to a scientific objectivity that biblical criticism has never really practiced and which is set up as a straw man by post-modern detractors. For Barton, the *critical* element is not the interest in history but more the spirit in which scholars enquire into history, even as history is not the main concern: "As a matter of fact, rather few biblical scholars have any historical training; they mostly come to theology and biblical studies from a literary or linguistic background"³⁹ and "historical study, where that is the concern, can be either critical or noncritical; and critical study can be historical or nonhistorical. This suggests that the term 'historical-critical method' is an awkward hybrid and might be better avoided."⁴⁰ Barton is aware that the historical-critical method "is widely misunderstood and is seen as thin, rationalistic, positivistic, and 'unliterary', when in fact it has been none of these things except where it has been poorly carried out."⁴¹ John J. Collins agrees, arguing that historical-criticism is "not the totalitarian monolith that some of its critics make it out to be,"⁴² a towering Babel now collapsed into postmodern babble, and has always been a multitude of different processes rather than a single method. On this issue, Barton concludes that, in essence,

criticism is neither historical nor a method. There has been a strong correlation with history, at least since the nineteenth century, and there has frequently been a tendency to speak as though criticism has methodological implications. But in itself the critical approach to the Bible is not a method but a series of explanatory hypotheses, driven by a particular attitude towards texts and textual meaning.⁴³

39 John Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism* (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), p. 36.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 39.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

42 John J. Collins, *The Bible after Babel: Historical-Criticism in a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2005), p. 3.

43 Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism*, pp. 67–68.

These attitudes, according to Barton, are primarily *literary*: for example, source criticism arises from a frustration with attempting to read coherence in a text that is a composite structure; form criticism arises from recognising that different genres of writing are present within a text, and textual critics have to constantly balance decisions to establish meanings in texts.⁴⁴ Barton can argue that “most of those who now press the claims of a literary approach to biblical texts see this as a challenge to how biblical criticism has been. In reality . . . biblical criticism was a literary movement from the beginning.”⁴⁵

Barton is surely thinking of such writers as Lowth and Herder and this takes us back to the discussion in chapter one as to how the Higher Criticism has always had the literary at its heart. However, to argue that contemporary literary approaches merely echo eighteenth-century criticism is not quite the same point. For Barton, literary and critical approaches are mutually illuminating and induce little alterity or epistemological otherness into the proceedings. Invoking the *literary* at this juncture allows Barton to move away from the characterization of the historical-critical method as exhibiting a thin and positivistic pseudo-objectivity, arguing that “what biblical or literary critics do in establishing the meaning and genre of a work is . . . [enter] into the text at a deep level, recognizing the shared humanity of the author, so that *cor ad cor loquitur* (heart speaks to heart),”⁴⁶ whilst also staying within the bounds of a ‘gentlemanly’ sense of what clusters around the term ‘literary’. Here, again, there are strong echoes of Lowth (and Herder) with the sense that accessing, understanding and appreciating the literary (and sacred) poetry evident in many biblical texts, allows the critic and reader to be transported back through time, “to feel them as a Hebrew, hearing or delivering the same words, at the same time, and in the same country.”⁴⁷

I am not arguing that this is an illegitimate move, more that Barton’s sense of the literary is also tied up how he defines the operations of the ‘literary’—while he is not quite going so far as saying the Bible *is* literature (the type of Bible I am calling ‘poetic’), he is claiming that

our aim as critics is not to translate the text (either literally or metaphorically) into our own terms, but to get inside it and understand it from within The task of exegetes is not to replace the text, but to help the reader to share the understanding of it that they themselves have achieved. In this, biblical criticism is in precisely the same position as

44 See *ibid.*, pp. 62–65.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 59.

47 Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, p. 56.

literary criticism; both are servants of the text, not its masters, and both are concerned to help the reader discover the plain sense.⁴⁸

What I want to argue however, with an eye on the next chapter where I position poetic retellings of Gen. 32 as an overtly *writerly* response to Bible, is that all this writing is dreamy heady stuff and often does not behave simply as an exegetical tool to serve the texts. As Kevin Hart identifies, Oscar Wilde, with a sideways glance at Matthew Arnold,⁴⁹ makes his character Gilbert in 'The Critic as Artist' (1890) declare that "Criticism is really creative in the highest sense of the word."⁵⁰ As Hart goes on to note, there is a contemporary understanding that criticism should do more than simply reflect on literature; it "should draw freely from the disciplines that surround it—anthropology, history, linguistics, philosophy and psychoanalysis—and, thus enriched, address itself to such apparently extra-literary topics as the representation of gender, race and class in writing from both high and popular culture."⁵¹

With this drawing from other disciplines in mind, Barton's invoking of the literary actually allows me to explore how the production of biblical criticism acts as a kind of "writing, the *pharmakon*, the going or leading astray."⁵²

This *pharmakon*, this 'medicine', this philter, which acts as both remedy and poison, already introduces itself into the body of the discourse with all its ambivalence. This charm, this spellbinding virtue, this power of fascination, can be—alternately or simultaneously—beneficent or maleficent [. . .]. Operating through seduction, the *pharmakon* makes one stray from one's general, natural, habitual paths and laws.⁵³

48 Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism*, p. 113.

49 Of course, Arnold's views on the relationship between literature and criticism are complex. In some ways he saw poetry and criticism as serving one another; criticism "tends to establish an order of ideas, if not absolutely true, yet true by comparison with that which it displaces; to make the best ideas prevail. Presently these new ideas reach society, the touch of truth is the touch of life, and there is a stir and growth everywhere; out of this stir and growth come the creative epochs of literature." Matthew Arnold, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," in *Selected Prose*, ed. P. J. Keating (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970), p. 134.

50 Oscar Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist', in *Oscar Wilde's Plays, Prose, Writings and Poems*, London 1967, p. 24. Qtd. in Hart, "The Poetics of the Negative," p. 281.

51 Ibid.

52 Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Dissemination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 71.

53 Ibid., p. 70.

In the *Phaedrus*, Phaedrus is in dialogue with Socrates, commenting that, outside the city, “anyone would take you . . . for a foreigner being shown the country by a guide, and not a native; you never leave town to cross the frontier nor even, I believe, so much as set foot outside the walls.” Socrates responds, “You must forgive me, dear friend; I’m a lover of learning, and trees and open country won’t teach me anything, whereas men in the town do. Yet you seem to have discovered a drug for getting me out . . . if you proffer me speeches bound in books I don’t doubt you can cart me all round Attica, and anywhere else you please.”⁵⁴ Imbibing the drug of writing can lead one outside the city of the *Republic*, out to where the poets and hydra-headed readers have been dispatched. Phaedrus comments that, out here, Socrates needs a guide and Barton agrees:

In origin, an exegete was not someone who drew out the meanings of texts, but a guide to a sacred place, who *led the visitor out* to see it and explain it, a kind of tour guide . . . in a sense, therefore . . . the true exegete is an eisegete, someone who brings the reader into the text’s inner sanctum. Biblical criticism so understood is much closer to modern literary approaches than is often thought.⁵⁵

But the remedy of bringing biblical and literary approaches together and carefully guiding the visiting Socrates into the ‘text’s inner sanctum’ is difficult with the hallucinogenic qualities of writing. A. K. M. Adam is also waiting outside the city and explains that, contra Barton,

the title we bear—‘exegete’—[is] not from the (misleading) etymology of ‘leading [meaning] out’ (as though it were derived from *exagō*, ‘to lead out’) of a text; instead we will point out that the epithet *exēgētēs* (from *exēgeomai*), was typically applied to a leader or advisor (an ancient Greek exegete who specialized in interpretation was usually the expounder of oracles and dreams). Where modern critics delve into the text to get something out of it, we will now acknowledge that meaning—to the extent that there is such a thing—does not inhere in a text any more than it might inhere in a dream (where would it go when you wake up?). Meaning is what we make of texts, not an ingredient in texts.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ *Phaedrus* 230d–e, qtd. *ibid.*, pp. 70–71.

⁵⁵ Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism*, p. 112. Emphasis in original.

⁵⁶ A. K. M. Adam, *What is Postmodern Biblical Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), pp. 32–33.

Barton's positioning of literary and biblical criticism as servants of the text (again, echoing Lowth and Herder in their desires to submit to the bible's sublime poetry), means that the uncanny dream interpretation that Adam cites, or the "unnerving spectre of the uncouth hydra-reader"⁵⁷ of (literary) Theory, is repressed under the guise of 'gentlemanly' liberal literary criticism. 'Uncouth hydra-readers' do not often desire submission to a text, whether this submission is inflected through literary *or* theological frameworks. In fact, the relationship between readers and texts is often much more conflictual than this. A literary/cultural critic like Roland Barthes writing on a text like Jacob wrestling the angel understands that "the reader takes an aggressive role in creating meaning"⁵⁸ on an elusive and contradictory text. Part of what characterizes historical-criticism (and as seen in the recent debates on the SBL website over the supposed 'dumbing down' of the guild by allowing groups which Ronald Hendel paints as 'creationists and snake-handlers' to join) is a deep suspicion towards excessive reading and writing.

Moore and Sherwood offer a background example into this type of thinking. Returning to the early eighteenth century for a moment, we find Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury, in his *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (first published in 1711, 3 Vols.) attempting to describe and delineate polite gentlemanly conduct in moral thought and practice, warning of the "popular fury . . . called 'panic' when the rage of the people, as we have sometimes known, has put them beyond themselves, especially where religion has had to do."⁵⁹ For Shaftesbury, "Good humour is not only the best security against enthusiasm but the best foundation of piety and true religion"⁶⁰ and,

provided we treat religion with good manners, we can never use too much good humour or examine it with too much freedom and familiarity. For, if it be genuine and sincere, it will not only stand the proof but thrive and gain advantage from hence. If it be spurious or mixed with any imposture, it will be detected and exposed.⁶¹

57 Moore and Sherwood, "Biblical Studies 'after' Theory: Onwards Towards the Past; Part Three: Theory in the First and Second Waves," p. 205.

58 The Bible and Culture Collective, *The Postmodern Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 135.

59 Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, ed. Lawrence E. Klein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 10.

60 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

61 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

Biblical criticism entered a scene in which gentlemanly conduct could assist in warding off “a plurality of meaning, and hence a plurality of readers, by identifying the true meaning, and making specialist scholars its official guardians.”⁶² Shaftesbury and other members of the intellectual elite felt that “the only viable response to religious violence was to create a sanctioned social space for tolerance and free-reading—but this had to be squared with the unnerving spectre of the uncouth hydra-reader beyond the charmed circle of gentleman scholars.”⁶³

One of the key paradoxes of the early modern intellectual landscape (and continuing into the present) is how, in creating and maintaining knowledge,

much modern epistemology has systematically argued that legitimate knowledge is defined precisely by its rejection of trust. If we are heard to say that we know something on the basis of trust, we are understood to say that we do not possess genuine knowledge at all. It is unwise to take the world on trust. Fools, cowards, and quacks do that sort of thing, and that is one way that we recognize them as such. Trust and authority stand against the very idea of *science*.⁶⁴

Overtuning dangerously ‘enthusiastic’ religious authorities in the name of autonomy and scientific reason is fundamental to ideas of modern critical practice. As we saw in chapter one, *distrusting* the biblical accounts as historically verifiable became a way to begin to construct alternative authorities around them. As Shapin notes, for thinkers such as René Descartes, Francis Bacon, and Robert Boyle, knowledge is supposed to be “the product of the sovereign individual confronting the world; reliance upon the views of others produces error. The very distrust which social theorists have identified as the most potent way of dissolving social order is said to be the most potent means of constructing our knowledge.”⁶⁵ And yet, “testimony was fully recognized as an invaluable resource for the making of knowledge and the ordering of society [albeit with the] acute anxiety that *undisciplined* reliance upon testimony would destroy both knowledge and social order.”⁶⁶ Shapin identifies that knowledge production could only proceed by the “notion of *epistemological*

62 Moore and Sherwood, “Biblical Studies ‘after’ Theory: Onwards Towards the Past; Part Three: Theory in the First and Second Waves,” p. 205.

63 Ibid.

64 Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth Century England* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1994), p. 16.

65 Ibid., p. 17.

66 Ibid., p. 211.

decorum [indicating] the expectation that knowledge will be evaluated according to its proper place in practical cultural and social action...doing the proper thing in the proper setting informed the assessment of knowledge-claims as well as the evaluation of social conduct.”⁶⁷

I will have cause to return to this concept of ‘epistemological decorum’ when arguing for poetic retellings as legitimate exegetical ventures but it is important to underline here how the ‘nature’ of biblical criticism has its roots in *civilizing* the interpretation of biblical material. The increasing focus on historicizing biblical texts distances them from simplistic (and potentially dangerous) usage in the political present and becomes a process of managing readership. Reading the Bible is replaced by biblical *scholarship*, becoming a discipline “that was narrowly specific in terms of the meaning that could legitimately be attributed to the biblical text, but diffuse in terms of the methods that could be utilized to mine and refine that meaning.”⁶⁸ ‘Critical scholarship’ is the watchword, keeping at bay the monsters produced by the sleep of reason.

Returning to the present, the conviction remains that professed (if not confessed) methodology must necessarily step in to guard against the chaos that using the literary imagination might have invoked. However, much of Jacques Derrida’s work (to invoke a chaotic signature) has been to show how exegetical or hermeneutic reading must always be a necessary misreading or mistake, “the mistake of ‘trying to arrest the text in a certain position, thus settling on a thesis, meaning, or truth.’”⁶⁹ This arresting is also ‘double’—*arresting* as in seizing and checking a text (stopping and methodologically searching) through specific disciplinary procedures; and an *arresting* text, a text that makes one stop, bewildered or fascinated by its form, ambiguity, beauty or fearful otherness.⁷⁰ Barton is invoking the literary within the biblical disciplinary constitution and, as I shall go on to stress, poets as imaginative ‘makers’ and retellers, especially those who might be labelled *bricoleurs*, are bad for the

67 Ibid., p. xxix. My emphasis.

68 Moore and Sherwood, “Biblical Studies ‘after’ Theory: Onwards Towards the Past; Part Three: Theory in the First and Second Waves,” p. 205.

69 John D. Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics: On Not Knowing Who We Are* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), p. 2. Caputo is quoting from *Points* and thus my quotation is at the third remove or site; imitating an interpretation through citation. Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Points: Interviews 1974–1994*, ed. Elisabeth Weber, trans. Peggy Kamuf, et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 96.

70 Barton himself admits to this ‘arresting’ nature of the bible—“most critics read texts because they love them; it is just that they do not always say so.” Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism*, p. 89. Emphasis in original.

constitution. As Plato puts it in *The Republic*, “we were right not to admit [the poet] into a city that is to be well-governed, for he arouses, nourishes, and strengthens [the inferior] part of the soul and so destroys the rational one [...].”⁷¹

With this in mind, even as he deploys the literary, Barton mans the biblical studies defences, writing “biblical critics utter a denial: no, there are some things that a text cannot mean. As *sane* readers of any text know, a text that can mean anything means nothing, and biblical criticism stands against treating the Bible as a kind of endless palimpsest on which we are free to inscribe our own meanings.”⁷² In a similar plea for sanity, John J. Collins stands alongside him: “What historical criticism does is set limits to the conversation, by saying what a given text could or could not mean in the ancient context. A text may have more than one possible meaning, but it cannot mean just anything at all.”⁷³

Although Barton does emphasize that the idea of a historical-critical method as an objective critical science has often been set up as a straw man by its detractors, and, to a large extent I am sympathetic to his argument, many biblical critics make their own hydra-headed straw man. What is defined as ‘postmodernism’ (as if we could streamline the work of such varied thinkers as, for example, Fredric Jameson, Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard, into a neat conceptual name for a movement) is often charged, by both literary and biblical critics, with the demise of humanism, an insane free-for-all of meaning as signifiers and signifieds flash in a fragmented and superficial hall of mirrors, as authors and authorities dissolve “in an acid-bath of textuality, intertextuality, semioticity and undecidability,”⁷⁴ with the spectre of Jacques Derrida rubbing his hands and gleefully dancing round the bubbling pot. But Derrida is not so easily associated with postmodernism and has never argued for a simple free-for-all of meaning in language; in fact, much of his work suggests that, although meaning *is* ultimately undecideable, we do arrest linguistic movement at certain points, making decisions (that are also scissions and incisions), and that postmodernisms demonstrate an awareness⁷⁵ of what is

71 Plato, “Republic,” p. 182.

72 Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism*, p. 114. My emphasis.

73 Collins, *The Bible after Babel: Historical-Criticism in a Postmodern Age*, p. 10.

74 Moore and Sherwood, “Biblical Studies ‘after’ Theory: Onwards Towards the Past; Part One: After ‘after Theory’, and Other Apocalyptic Conceits,” p. 18.

75 Of the many proliferating definitions of postmodernity, one aspect that sociologist Zygmunt Bauman picks up on is the sense in which postmodernism is an affect of the ways in which modernity is scrutinised: ‘Postmodernity is modernity coming of age [...],’ *Intimations of Postmodernity* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 272.

cut away, excised or othered in order for meaning to 'hold true'. I am interested in the encoded 'reading again' (*relegere*) that occurs in a poetic retelling. Far from the texts being made 'to mean anything at all,' retellings are entwined within the approaches and stance the poet takes towards the biblical text, and the 'filters' of the cultural moment in which the poetic word is written.⁷⁶

In emphasizing the literary as an intertwined root of biblical criticism, Barton might be imagined as manning the critical defences whilst the Trojan horses of Theory have already entered the camp. As we have seen, Barton feels the over-emphasis on the 'historical' in historical-criticism has instilled a myth of scientific objectivity in biblical studies, but the critical as opposed to the noncritical (rather than the precritical) is still foundational. However, in a delightful aside hidden in the back of *Derrida's Bible: Reading a Page of Scripture With a Little Help From Derrida*, he is willing to admit that the trouble with historical-criticism is that "a concern for *realia*, historical context, textual stratification, origins and authors, keeps it from seeing the length and breadth and depth and height of the text. It keeps its eye firmly on the ball but somehow fails to watch the game."⁷⁷ Postmodern concern for "the marginal and the 'trivial' reorientates the reader who has grown up with a traditional 'historical-critical' map"⁷⁸ and "Derrida and those who follow him alert us to aspects of the biblical text we would otherwise overlook. I want to say that these aspects are 'really there,' and in this I reveal my ultimately objectivist character; but I want also to thank postmodernism for making them apparent."⁷⁹ This is not quite a confession or conversion but it is not as virulently anti-Theory as the sentiments of those in the literary criticism camp of *Theory's Empire*.

I have suggested that Barton's framing of the nature of biblical criticism might be read as more porous than first thought. Invoking the literary as an old remedy to postmodernism's arguments with the historical-critical has provided the opportunity to allow the Theoretical poison/remedy to drip through

76 I take the ideas of 'approach, stance, and filter' from Lesleigh Stahlberg's excellent analysis of the process of retelling and making literary afterlives. She posits that "... the central aspects of retelling: [can be described] as approach (how a later text gains access to the earlier), stance (the attitude the later text takes to the earlier), and filter (the lens through which the later views the earlier)." Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg, *Sustaining Fictions: Intertextuality, Midrash, Translation and the Literary Afterlife of the Bible* (London and New York: T & T Clark, 2008), p. ix.

77 John Barton, "Beliebigkeit," in *Derrida's Bible (Reading a Page of Scripture with a Little Help from Derrida)*, ed. Yvonne Sherwood (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 302.

78 Ibid.

79 Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism*, p. 303.

and question some of Barton's premises. I now want to ask questions of how formulating the idea of the Bible-as-literature affects how it may be read and rewritten. If Barton approaches the texts with a literary-critical eye, whilst maintaining that the texts themselves remain essentially 'historical' documents, what happens to an approach constituted by treating the Bible as literature, as writing?

The Bible-as-Literature: Robert Alter and Frank Kermode vs. The Bible and Culture Collective

The constellations of ideas and work around a demarcating the Bible-as-literature are extremely large and can be followed up from a number of different angles. An illuminating view on these ideas is given by comparing the introductions to two quite different approaches to the post-theological Bible; Robert Alter and Frank Kermode's *Literary Guide to the Bible* and the Bible and Culture Collective's *Postmodern Bible*.

The Literary Guide to the Bible

In their work, Alter and Kermode offer "a new view of the Bible as a work of great literary force and authority, a work of which it is entirely credible that it should have shaped the minds and lives of intelligent men and women for two millennia or more."⁸⁰ There is a whole host of presuppositions at work here that are all the more telling in the light of Sheehan's work on the way in which the Enlightenment Bible is repositioned as the 'cultural' Bible. Literary 'force' is immediately linked with authority again in a similar sense to Lowth and Herder's understanding that it would be an aesthetic response to Bible in which religious truth would be found. In terms of biblical criticism itself, Alter and Kermode argue that the historical-critical method has diverted attention from the Bible's literary qualities, its narrative, poetry, and prophecy. As they highlight, "what has happened now is that the interpretation of the texts as they actually exist has been revalidated."⁸¹ The type of Bible at work here is one in which it is positioned as the godfather of the Western literary canon, although, in truth, it is rapidly demoted to being only a significant *part* of this canon. In order for this terminology to work, one must have a sense of the *type* of literature Bible might be. Eagleton argues that if "it will not do to see literature as an 'objective', descriptive category, neither will it do to say that literature is just what people whimsically choose to call literature";⁸² therefore, if

80 Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, eds., *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 4.

81 Ibid.

82 Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, p. 14.

both 'Bible' and 'literature' are fluid terms, a value-judgement of 'literature' is needed in order to understand the ramifications of the paradigm 'Bible-as-Literature'. As this paradigm is deployed to demonstrate the authority of Bible as literature, there is, in fact, a subtle power-play in operation. If the literary canon "emerges as the secular equivalent of the biblical canon, a body of texts endowed with unique authority and power, and worthy of the attention of generations of scholarly experts,"⁸³ the literary quality of Bible stands alongside the measuring-stick (Gk. *kanon*) of whatever a certain culture designates as 'literature'. For Alter and Kermode, Bibles may speak authoritatively, but only through being translated into *literary* language.

This literary language is subtly different to Barton's sense of a literary *approach*. He argues that a literary approach is sensitive to questions of form and genre in a critical vein, "that biblical criticism, in its quest for this plain sense, is a semantic or linguistic and a literary operation first and foremost"⁸⁴ not that the Bible is literature in itself. Alter admits this facet of biblical criticism but argues differently to recast the Bible as literature:

According to one common line of thought, the Hebrew Bible exhibits certain literary embellishments and literary interludes, but those who would present 'the Bible as literature' must turn it around to an odd angle from its own original emphases, which are theological, legislative, historiographic, and moral. This opposition between literature and the really serious things collapses the moment we realise that it is the exception in any culture for literary invention to be a purely aesthetic activity.⁸⁵

On the one hand, Alter broadens the sense of the literary qualities of biblical writing beyond seeing the Bible as an aesthetic product. However, as he goes on to argue, those who shaped this literature *were* aesthetically minded, recasting biblical redactors as creative authors in a Romantic vein:

If in general the literary imagination exhibits what Coleridge called an 'esemplastic' power, a faculty for molding disparate elements into an expressively unified whole not achieved outside of art, this power is abundantly evident in the work of the so-called redactors, so that often

83 Jo Carruthers, "Literature," in *The Blackwell Companion the Bible and Culture*, ed. John F. A. Sawyer (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), p. 25.

84 Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism*, p. 101.

85 Robert Alter, "Introduction to the Old Testament," in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 15.

the dividing line between redactor and author is hard to draw, or if it is drawn, does not necessarily demarcate an essential difference.⁸⁶

Alter suggests that in the process of editing the narratives are unified into a coherent whole, so that the redactors are effectively authoring them, displaying a literary imagination redolent of the Great Authors that the Great Theorists have replaced. In arguing for literary unity, Alter sees Deconstruction as “a sectarian manifestation that radically disavows all unities [. . .].”⁸⁷ Following this, he notes that “there is a distinctive poetics informing both biblical narrative and biblical poetry, and an understanding of it will help us in many instances to make plain sense of a puzzling text instead of exercising that loose and derivative mode of literary invention that goes under the scholarly name of emendation.”⁸⁸ Linking with Barton over this ‘plain sense’, that “the text’s possibilities for meaning continue to be constrained by the context of its writing—whether or not one insists on ‘what the author meant,’”⁸⁹ Alter wants it both ways. The redactors are allowed an extensive literary imagination, which is to be commended whilst, in contrast, readers must simply make ‘plain sense’ of the redacted text through a formal understanding of literary tropes; for the passive reader, literary imagination and invention are disallowed. Thus, by combining Barton and Alter’s senses of the literary here, we might have a sense of an artfully crafted biblical literature, ‘authored’ by imaginative redactors, to be approached through a gentlemanly literary criticism that serves to illuminate these writings attentively, without trying to outshine them in bravura flashes of postmodern creativity. My difficulties are not with this constitution of the reading event *per se* (it has offered many illuminating readings of biblical texts), but I want to continue to question the ‘epistemological decorum’ that the poets and artists are expected to observe when the pharmakon of writing is dripping from their pens.

I shall go on to utilize Alter’s extensive work in the Bible-as-literature stream in chapter four on the ‘double canonicities’ and poetic retelling of Bible where some of his work takes a different tack on sailing around the Big Three issues of writer, text, reader. However, at this juncture, I will amend the Big Three to a more circular movement of writer, text, reader, rewriter, keeping in mind that, after Foucault and Derrida, some of these partners dissolve at the edges as they dance the linguistic turn.

86 Ibid., p. 25.

87 Ibid.

88 Ibid., p. 27.

89 Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism*, p. 105.

What is also at stake here is how these interrelated disciplines imagine Bible and how they conceive of their own practices that result in sustaining Bible for the age even if, paradoxically, this is a process of deconstruction. As Jo Carruthers highlights, it could be argued that Bible has “been subsumed by the very intellectual traditions and cultural categories that it gave rise to. In short, the Bible has shifted from being the archetypal *book*—the greatest source-book of language, imagery and narrative—to simply being a *text* like any other.”⁹⁰ This shift to *text* means that questions over meaning, authority, and relevance cause Bible to continue dancing across the disciplines, never static, always on the move.

The Postmodern Bible

If we turn to the introduction to *The Postmodern Bible* by the Bible and Culture Collective, we can see that they explicitly distance their project from Alter and Kermode, although they share the same distrust of the orientation of much historical-critical work. As they outline, several of the reading strategies offered in *The Postmodern Bible* “differ explicitly from modern historical-critical approaches. These strategies focus critical attention on the power the Bible currently wields in culture and society and show that historical critics have in any case been implicated in these power relations, generally without recognising or acknowledging it.”⁹¹ They also include Alter and Kermode within this accusation as they note that *The Literary Guide* consciously excludes “feminist, ideological, psychoanalytical, deconstructive or Marxist”⁹² questions and approaches to seemingly “underwrite a broader form of canonical literary criticism.”⁹³ The Collective identify that, alongside Bible as canonical text and literatures that have become canonical, there are also canonical interpretative strategies that have been used when approaching biblical texts, both historical-critical and literary-critical.

Once again, there are different types of Bible present here. For Alter and Kermode, the Bible is part of culture as a literary cornerstone, its authority speaking through both its own poetics and aesthetics (and the critic’s appreciation of these facets), and also from its position as a key canonical influence over all other Western Literature (with Homer operating as a close ally). For the Collective, ‘Bible’ is part of culture but its authority lies in its positioning as a reading site where “modernity’s enabling assumptions about reference,

90 Carruthers, “Literature,” pp. 253–254.

91 The Bible and Culture Collective, *The Postmodern Bible*, p. 4.

92 Ibid., p. 7.

93 Ibid.

representation, method, and subjectivity”⁹⁴ can be foregrounded and critiqued. They question the ‘canonical’ approaches of both historical-critical and literary interpretations (this difficult three-way dance with critical theory again), attuned to the authority that these approaches have garnered in the practices of the Enlightenment Bible. However, there is no escape from the bindings of re-reading (*relegere*) and the Collective is forced into building an alternative canon, one that understands Bible as displaying a postmodern unreadability, a collection of texts that seems eminently suited to postmodern notions of ‘frictionality’, aporia, gaps, incomplete suggestiveness and the difficulties of reading texts that overflow the boundaries of the modern.

Readerly possibilities towards texts then become important, balancing on the highwire tensions between literary theory and biblical studies. However, as I shall continue to emphasize, these highwire readerly possibilities are also ‘bound’ to textualities in different ways as these possibilities occur within the networks of discourse. It may be that Cunningham understands the “demand [to gap-filling as], evidently, an invitation to fiction,”⁹⁵ but this does not necessarily entail that postmodern engagements “with the Biblical story are generically the same . . . all in effect aestheticisations of the Biblical story.”⁹⁶ As the Collective explicitly state, the postmodern Bible is far from simply a mono-aesthetic project:⁹⁷

We are also arguing for a transforming biblical criticism, one that undertakes to understand the ongoing impact of the Bible on culture and one that, therefore, benefits from the rich resources of contemporary thought on language, epistemology, method, rhetoric, power, reading, as well as the pressing and often contentious political questions of ‘difference’—gender, race, class, sexuality and, indeed, religion—which have come to occupy center stage in discourse both public and academic.⁹⁸

94 Ibid., p. 13.

95 Valentine Cunningham, “The Best Stories in the Best Order? Canons, Apocryphas and (Post) Modern Reading,” *Literature and Theology* 14, no. 1 (2000): p. 77.

96 Ibid., p. 78.

97 I shall be arguing that the ‘poetic/aesthetic’ Bible, in an extended sense, strongly influences my own work, taking as one of the connotations of ‘aesthetics’, Mieke Bal’s assertion that “the term *aesthetics* suggests a connection to the senses, through which the object ‘binds’ itself to the reader”. Mieke Bal, *Loving Yusuf: Conceptual Travels from Present to Past* (London and Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2008), p. 12.

98 The Bible and Culture Collective, *The Postmodern Bible*, p. 2.

This is a criticism that is aware of the ways in which reading and writing subjects might be constituted within networks of discourse, a “discussion of what you can know and how you can know it [. . .]; how you as a subject of knowledge are shaped [. . .]; and who benefits ultimately from what you claim to know.”⁹⁹

The *literariness* of the biblical literature then is not simply aesthetic. For the Collective, this literariness exhibits a textuality which allows those ‘attractive moves’ that Moore and Sherwood affirm as arising “at least in part from a desire to talk about ‘larger human themes.’”¹⁰⁰ As the Collective confirms, poststructuralist and deconstructive interpretation for the most part

consists of very close readings of specific texts [. . .]. These readings have been highly unorthodox as they have rejected certain well-established and central values: the univocity of meaning, the privileging of the author’s intention (or any other point of origin), the location of meaning ‘in’ the text, the separability of the text’s ‘inside’ from its ‘outside’ (text from reader, text from context), the objective reality of history, and so forth. Deconstruction rejects the notion that the origin (*archē*), whatever its form (the author, God, the signified), should be given any sort of priority; it denies that there is an origin in any substantial sense. (The signified is always another signifier; the author is the product of his or her texts; every writing is a rereading; every reading a rewriting, and so forth.)¹⁰¹

The quest for origins has always been a foundational and organisational aspect of a societal present that must be able to tell a story about where it has come from, where it is now, and where it might be going in the future. Archaeologies are bound to eschatologies, each reading the other.

I shall be exploring the idea of the Postmodern Bible and its relationship to the Poetic Bible in the following chapter, examining how the persistence of broadly Romantic conceptions of poetry and literature affect critical and poetic responses to biblical texts. At this point and following Barton’s invocation of the literary nature of biblical criticism, I want to push this even further into the literariness of writing history, both in the sense that biblical criticism *is* still wedded to writing historical con-texts that constrain the pharmakon of writing (there are certain things that biblical literatures cannot mean, as

99 Ibid., p. 4.

100 Moore and Sherwood, “Biblical Studies ‘after’ Theory: Onwards Towards the Past; Part One: After ‘after Theory’, and Other Apocalyptic Conceits,” p. 21.

101 The Bible and Culture Collective, *The Postmodern Bible*, p. 130.

Collins and Barton assert), and to the text themselves in a kind of 'double-reading' of 'double-texts'—1) the text in front of us that must also be situated in 2) a (written) con-text of historical conjecture.

As much as I have been critical of some of the implications of John Barton and John J. Collins' work, I shall be arguing in chapter three that, in fact, the postmodern and the historical-critical *host* one another in a mutually constitutive relationship. However, when Collins writes, "a good deal of postmodernist commentary on the Bible seems to me to fall outside the range of what might reasonably be called exegesis or forgo concern for 'plausible interaction' with the text... not every reaction triggered by a text can be regarded as a valid meaning or interpretation,"¹⁰² I am immediately concerned with how this historicizing reaction to biblical texts might be constructed as a 'plausible interaction' when it too is embedded in the narrowing 'anguish' of signification in writing. Is historical writing necessarily the only 'plausible interaction' with a biblical text? And how does an understanding of a 'science of writing' (what Derrida calls a *grammatology*) affect the received hierarchical oppositions of certain types of 'vulgar writing' over others; e.g. a 'vulgar' historical-criticism being characterized as a deeper engagement with a biblical text than the 'vulgar' poetic retelling? What deeper sense of the operation of 'writing' is occurring here?

*Writing and History, or, Presiding over the "Organisation of Death"*¹⁰³

Jacques Derrida's thought on how the conceptual privileging of speech as a more authentic sign of 'real presence' (of thought to self, of self to the world)

102 Collins, *The Bible after Babel: Historical-Criticism in a Postmodern Age*, p. 17. There is an interesting blurring here that also underlines the complexities of this debate. Collins links the terms, 'commentary', 'exegesis', and 'interpretation'. Arguably, many so-called 'postmodern commentaries' do not actually pretend to operate as 'exegesis'. Exegesis, as Barton has already explored, denotes a more scientific-critical guiding approach to the texts, focussing on important concerns such as original language use and context. I would argue that 'postmodern commentaries' are much more concerned with a hermeneutic encounter between reader, text and contemporary contexts, and that the notion of 'plausible interaction' is a highly ideological value-judgement on certain interpretations.

103 Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," p. 92. Michel de Certeau also makes the point that historians are obsessed with death or attempting to animate the voices of the past, to make the past speak in the present, even as this speech can only ever be ventriloquism. "Discourse about the past has the status of being the discourse of the dead. The object circulating in it is only the absent. While its meaning is to be a language shared by the narrator and his or her readers, in other words, by living beings. Whatever is expressed engages a group's communication with itself through this reference to an absent, third party that constitutes its past... Through these combinations with an absent term, history becomes the myth of

over writing (merely 'the symbol of spoken words', according to Aristotle) continues to bear fruit in my analysis of how certain types of writing are deemed legitimate biblical interpretation while others are not. As such, it is important to distinguish between the different ways in which I use the word 'writing' and its cognates in my argument, from its narrow usage when referring to specific examples of poetic retellings to the broader deconstruction of philosophical metaphysics that Derrida enacts with his exploration of what he terms *arche-writing*.

Working with Ferdinand de Saussure's foundational *Cours de linguistique générale* as an example of how the relationship between speech and writing has been imagined in the Western philosophical tradition—writing subordinated to speech as a derivative 'sign of a sign'—Derrida demonstrates how an *arche-writing* always already usurps the idea that 'speech' manages to transmit both sound and sense more effectively than inscription. For Saussure, writing is the external *graphie* of language, inessential to the functioning of the sign. As Derrida notes with this in mind, "writing would thus have the exteriority that one attributes to utensils; to what is even an imperfect tool and a dangerous, almost maleficent, technique."¹⁰⁴ According to Derrida, Saussure's labours in the *Course* are to denounce the *moral* repercussions that result when the 'natural' order of a linguistic system—the once pure relationship between speech and sense—is contaminated by writing; the "perversion of artifice engenders monsters."¹⁰⁵

However, Saussure's work on linguistics as a system of signs characterized by their phonetic and conceptual *difference* from one another begins to undermine speech as having an established priority over writing. If, as Saussure argues, language relies on this system of difference rather than an essential fusing of signifier and signified, then, as Derrida explores, the functions of writing might better demonstrate the differential nature of language itself. There is an important sense then "in which the lowly position of writing—inferior, derivative, always at one step removed from the main action—accurately describes the position of language as a whole."¹⁰⁶ Instead of writing being an unfortunate exterior accident of language, "if writing signifies inscription and especially the durable institution of a sign (and that is the only irreducible kernel

language. It manifests the very condition of discourse: *a death*." De Certeau, *The Writing of History*, p. 46.

104 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 34.

105 Ibid., p. 38.

106 Arthur Bradley, *Derrida's Of Grammatology*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008) p. 67.

of the concept of writing), writing in general covers the entire field of linguistic signs.”¹⁰⁷ In fact, “language is not merely a sort of writing . . . but a species of writing.”¹⁰⁸

Arche-writing then refers to Derrida’s contention that writing names the framework common to all systems of signification that attempt to communicate and preserve metaphysical ‘presence’, the necessary connection between phonetics, signs, and concept:

I would wish rather to suggest that the alleged derivativeness of writing, however real and massive, was possible only on one condition: that the ‘original,’ ‘natural,’ etc. language had never existed, never been intact and untouched by writing, that it had itself always been a writing. An arche-writing whose necessity and new concept I wish to indicate and outline here; and which *I continue to call writing only because it essentially communicates with the vulgar concept of writing*. The latter could not have imposed itself historically except by the dissimulation of the arche-writing, by the desire for a speech displacing its other and its double and working to reduce its difference. If I persist in calling that difference writing, it is because, within the work of historical repression, writing was, by its situation, destined to signify the most formidable difference. It threatened the desire for the living speech from the closest proximity, it *breached* living speech from within and from the very beginning. And as we shall begin to see, difference cannot be thought without the *trace*.¹⁰⁹

A key element here is the relationship between arche-writing and vulgar writing, which can be thought of as similar to Freud’s positing of a ‘non-existent’ yet originary unconscious made manifest in visible behavioural and psychological signs. In ‘Freud and the Scene of Writing’, Derrida explores the metaphor that Freud chooses to use in explaining his theories; the Mystic Writing Pad. For Freud, this erasable wax tablet illustrates the tenuous links between perception and memory. Writing can be inscribed upon the pad, and then immediately erased by lifting the celluloid covering sheet. However, the inscriptions that have been made leave permanent traces on the wax or resin slab underneath. In Freud’s thinking, the wax slab stands as a metaphor for the unconscious; “[t]he becoming-visible which alternates with the disappearance

107 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 44.

108 Ibid., p. 52.

109 Ibid., pp. 56–7. My emphasis.

of what is written would be the flickering up (*Aufleuchten*) and passing-away (*Vergehen*) of consciousness in the process of perception."¹¹⁰

For Derrida then, Freud's work becomes a way of understanding the non-existent yet originary *arche*-writing, the inscribed traces that mark the *différance* in linguistic signification. Thinking of the writing pad, Derrida suggests that writing is "unthinkable without repression. The condition for writing is that there be neither a permanent contact nor an absolute break between strata [...]. The 'subject' of writing does not exist if we mean by that some sovereign solitude of the author. The subject of writing is a *system* of relations between strata: the Mystic Pad, the psyche, society, the world."¹¹¹ In effect, the 'machinery' or work of *arche*-writing constitutes the vulgar, common, writing we shall see in biblical criticism and poetic retellings. Deciding on the legitimacy or otherwise of certain interpretative moves is marked by how different disciplinary writings articulate and participate in the *a priori* *arche*-writing. I shall be returning to this idea from alternative angles throughout the rest of this work.

Biblical Archives

Returning to John Barton's work on the 'nature' of biblical criticism, when he writes of the 'literal' sense of the Bible, he is careful to ensure that this is nuanced. Focussing on the literal reading, the marks on the page, one is able to notice that Gen. 1 and 2 'literally' show up two different stories. He argues that taking the text 'literally' is key to biblical scholarship; the fundamentalist reader does not actually take the text literally at all, but non-literally, trying to gloss discrepancies and unify the discordant qualities, the actual fractured textures of the text. As he explains, "this point is thus double-edged. Critical inquiry does often involve taking the biblical text literally, but not taking it to be literally true [...]."¹¹² Mieke Bal argues that fundamentalism "is a reading posture that ... takes signs as transparent and meanings as eternal"¹¹³ and that minutely close reading, focusing in on the texts, ensures that "literalism is not a form of fundamentalism but a tool to hold the latter in check. Against words as weapons, literalism liberates words from their rigid imprisonment in fundamentalist selective hostility. It turns them into words again—conveyers of ever-shifting meanings, sustained by the fantasies of porous subjects."¹¹⁴ In this

110 Derrida, "Freud and the Scene of Writing," in *Writing and Difference*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 282–3.

111 Ibid., p. 285.

112 Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism*, p. 95.

113 Bal, *Loving Yusuf: Conceptual Travels from Present to Past*, p. 74.

114 Ibid., p. 75.

vein, Bal notes that, “on the one hand, the Scripture must be fixed, canonized. Yet, or rather because of that fixation, it continues to require exegetical work. The signifiers fly, and the literalist reader follows their flight.”¹¹⁵

Of course, Barton and Bal would presumably disagree on where the reading of the ‘literals’ might take them.¹¹⁶ As Tom Conley, translator of Michel de Certeau’s *The Writing of History* suggests, “[t]he writing of history can begin only when a present is divided from a past. An initial act of exclusion separates current time from past time, or the living from the dead. The historian’s sense of duration is defined by what is left behind, or registered as past. Once this ‘other’ time is established, interpretation is legitimized, speculation develops, and writing is set in motion.”¹¹⁷ For Bal, once a past is registered and the play between present and past begins, and because of the interpreter’s always belated relation, reading literally can become part of an inescapably ‘pre-posterous’ reading and writing of history; as she explains in a footnote, “[p]reposterous is the term I have introduced . . . for the wilful and thoughtful deployment of anachronism in the interpretation of historical artefacts. The idea is to draw the attention to the productive potential of asserting the interpreter’s position in the present as an entrance into understanding the past insofar as it is relevant for the present.”¹¹⁸ This willingness to entertain thoughtful anachronism that places a historical text relative to meaning-making in the present, part of the interpreter’s ‘cultural memory’, is much too far for most biblical critics to go. The bounds of Collins’ ‘plausible interaction’ are being tested and stretched.

J. Maxwell Miller admits that a heavy reliance on written evidence “is perhaps the main distinguishing characteristic of historical research as compared with other disciplines that also seek to understand the human past,”¹¹⁹ although data is collected and interpreted from cognate disciplines such as archaeology, sociology and anthropology as well. Miller characterizes historical reconstruction as more of “an ongoing conversation between the past and the present”¹²⁰

115 Ibid., p. 126.

116 ‘Literals’ can also be the typos in printed material, a misprint surely leading to misreading, the page littered with letters that may or may not be literals.

117 In de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, p. viii.

118 Bal, *Loving Yusuf: Conceptual Travels from Present to Past*, p. 13.

119 J. Maxwell Miller, “Reading the Bible Historically: The Historian’s Approach,” in *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Application*, eds. Steven L. McKenzie and Stephen R. Haynes (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), p. 11. This list of ‘cognate disciplines’ working on bibles is another example of how much scholarly energy from an array of disciplines is expended on this relatively small amount of ‘biblical literature’.

120 Ibid., p. 12.

even as this democratic and dialogical element is belied by the metaphor of the historian being compared to an investigative lawyer gathering evidence, creating a hypothesis (often by the 'principle of analogy', bringing "the biblical story into line with reality as we moderns perceive it"¹²¹ but careful not to allow the 'preposterous' to creep in) and presenting it to a jury for judgement.¹²² This then becomes historical criticism as an archiving and legal process, a process that bestows signifying power to a social group (or *litterati*) who may pronounce judgement over the utilisation of certain texts. This is part of the system of writing history. As Derrida positions the archive,

the meaning of 'archive', its only meaning, comes to it from the Greek *arkheion*: initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the archons, those who commanded. The citizens who thus held and signified political power were considered to possess the right to make or to represent the law. On account of their publicly recognized authority, it is at their home, in that place which is their house (private house, family house, or employee's house), that official documents are filed. The archons are first of all the documents' guardians. They do not only ensure the physical security of what is deposited and of the substrate. They are also accorded the hermeneutic right and competence. They have the power to interpret the archives.¹²³

The power and legitimation to interpret the archives has been a circling theme throughout these first two chapters. Sheehan's work on the Enlightenment Bible showed that recasting biblical manuscripts as 'documentary evidence' for the historical antiquity of these texts emphasized their difference and distance from how they were being 'illegitimately' used by theologians or rival authorities, whilst also surrounding the documents with disciplinary webs. I would argue that placing such texts in an archiving structure (which is more of an on-going process than a site in itself) implicitly admits of the difficulties that unarrested writing can make for authoritative and logocentric interpretation.

Interpreting the story of Theuth/Thoth's offering of writing to the king Thamus, Derrida writes, that "from the position of the holder of the scepter, the desire of writing is indicated, designated and denounced as a desire for orphanhood and patricidal subversion. Isn't this *pharmakon* then a criminal

121 Ibid.

122 Ibid., p. 14.

123 Jacques Derrida and Eric Prenowitz, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," *Diacritics* 25, no. 2 (1995): pp. 9–10.

thing, a poisoned present?"¹²⁴ Writing is a gift to the king that is also a tactical subversion of the King's spoken, paternal and logocentric authority. Writing becomes an attempt at accessing signifying power. Within the structures of the archon's methodological 'home', that space from which interpretation is legitimated, writing is always already provoking a *déconstruire*, a deconstruction that is not destruction, but a dismantling of the bricks, a shift, and a rebuilding. As Derrida puts it in another essay, such a structure

can be methodologically threatened in order to be comprehended more clearly and to reveal not only its supports but also that secret place in which it is neither construction nor ruin but lability. This operation is called (from the Latin) soliciting. In other words, shaking in a way related to the whole (from *sollus*, in archaic Latin 'the whole', and from *citare*, 'to put in motion').¹²⁵

Where before I was arguing that Barton's allowing the 'literary' into biblical criticism (or allowing Thoth's dubious artful gift/pharmakon of writing into the middle of its 'original' structural practices) places undecideable literariness or hydra-headed writing in the middle of the signifying city, Derrida shows how, as methodological practices are recited or 'put in motion', they themselves reveal and solicit their own foundations. Historicizing or archiving helps put a stop to the motion of textuality by placing the texts under a kind of 'house arrest', placing them in the homes of the archons where this

archontic power, which also gathers the functions of unification, of identification, of classification, must be paired with what we will call the power of consignation. By *consignation*, we do not only mean, in the ordinary sense of the word, the act of assigning residence or of entrusting so as to put into reserve (to consign, to deposit), in a place and on a substrate, but here the act of consigning through *gathering together signs*.¹²⁶

Gathering together the signs and consigning the movements or choreographies between writer, text, reader, and rewriter is part and parcel of what all interpretations must enact. As we shall see, poetic retelling attempts to access these archives through vulgar and improper writing in different ways. Because of the non-existent traces that enable *arche*-writing, archontic power is about

¹²⁴ Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," p. 77.

¹²⁵ Derrida, "Force and Signification," pp. 4–5.

¹²⁶ Derrida and Prenowitz, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," p. 10.

deploying a sense of the 'original' as inauguration and protecting that 'original' at the same time. This enables certain types of writing, such as poetic retellings, to be defined as overtly supplemental and thus not able to access such archontic power.

I want to maintain the tensions between the historical and the literary by looking at the processes of historiography, archive, and the *pharmakon* of invoking the literary in biblical studies through Michel de Certeau's work *The Writing of History*. Although different in some ways to Derrida's work, de Certeau offers further qualification for how central the *pharmakon* of 'writing' is to those biblical scholars that utilize the historical in certain ways, particularly as limit or arrest.

History, Writing and 'Scripture'

As we have seen in the process of the archive, positioning the texts under an authority or archon creates and confers a value-in-absence. Even with the consigning or attempted absenting of writing to the archive, "the past will always enter the flow of current life because it is an absence on which the visible evidence of truth is based. Most often this return is shaped in what de Certeau terms the 'scriptural' basis of writing."¹²⁷ This 'scriptural' basis is not necessarily religious or theological but the "homologies of literature, Scripture, and history are implied in the French, locating—in the formulation of de Certeau's title—the doubly identical mission of literature as both *écriture* and chronicle."¹²⁸ As we have seen above in the discussions over the linguistic turn, the 'turn to religion' in continental philosophy, and the debates over 'faith and reason' in contemporary biblical scholarship, this homological haunting is not so pronounced in English but the echoes trouble all of these separations.

Writing history is based on writing a necessarily absent past, a con-text. These written origins help to organize the (written) present through an *écriture* that operates and signifies (consigns) the abstract nouns history, scripture and literature in the same moment. The critical judgement, the decision and scission, then has to be made in order for an exegete to allow the disciplinary weight of one of these names to shift the meaningful balance in one direction or the other. Significations are circling; the decisions of reading pull them into alignment, if only for as long as the event of a singular reading takes place. As de Certeau underlines, the historiographical operation often argues that "a 'beginning' situated in a former time might explain the present: each historian

¹²⁷ De Certeau, *The Writing of History*, p. xix.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xx.

situates elsewhere the inaugural rupture, at the point where his or her investigations stop; that is, at the borders demarcating a specialization within the disciplines to which he or she belongs. In fact, historians begin from present determinations. Current events are their real beginning.”¹²⁹ Deciding on the point of the rupture between past and present then involves an *écriture* that is imagined as historical and yet is embedded in the operations of literature. Managing this possible excess or ‘surplus of meaning’ is how the writing becomes chronicle, yet attempts to avoid anachronism.

I am not suggesting that there is no such thing as ‘history’ or that events recorded in the past, and read in the present, never happened. As de Certeau underlines, “all production of meaning admits to an event that took place and that permitted it to be accomplished,”¹³⁰ going on to argue that the writing of history does not reject reality and turn in on itself. What has happened is that,

the *relation* to the real has changed. And if meaning cannot be apprehended in the form of a specific knowledge that would either be drawn from the real or might be added to it, it is because every ‘historical fact’ results from a praxis, because it is already the sign of an act and therefore a statement of meaning. It results from procedures which have allowed a mode of comprehension to be articulated as a discourse of ‘facts’.¹³¹

Historiographical practice then sets an “originary *limit* which founds a reality as ‘past’. This is clarified in the techniques proportioned to the task of ‘making history’. Now this gap seems to be negated by the operation that establishes it, since this ‘past’ returns in historiographical practice.”¹³² A critical limit inaugurates a ‘past’, distanced and utterly different or other to the present. But, at the same time as this necessary limit and separation is established, the bridge is crossed by writing ‘historical facts’ that are delineated by a present distinguishing itself from a dead past. Making a present identity *thinkable* involves promoting “a selection between what can be *understood* and what must be *forgotten* in order to obtain the representation of a present intelligibility.”¹³³ Writing ‘historical facts’, resulting from a praxis embedded within a discourse of what is legitimately thinkable, then becomes akin to how we unpicked the history of the word ‘fact’ in chapter one with its roots in *facere*, as a thing done,

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 11.

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 44.

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 30.

¹³² Ibid., p. 36.

¹³³ Ibid., p. 4.

or performed, a participatory 'feat'.¹³⁴ We are back with Cunningham's 'Big Three'—author, text, reader—inflating 'reader' to also signify the rewriter that produces more texts that participate in the meaning-making processes between these relationships; writing history is edging ever closer to the *pharmakon* of literature. Indeed, as Conley highlights,

[i]n this way *The Writing of History* implies that the aims of historiography and literature have been converging since the Enlightenment. The task of the archivist involves deciphering hidden relations held in discourses of other times, while the creative writer weaves those same relations, whether with death or posterity, into a fabric of poetry fashioned from contemporary life. Where the historian reveals the ineffable dimensions of social order that the past could not control, the modern artist invests them in conscious designs that are not a product of chance—in webbing of contradiction, ambivalence, and equivocation in language. On many occasions Michel de Certeau suggests that fiction and history are quasi-identical.¹³⁵

For a biblical scholar like Roland Boer, this convergence of historiography and fiction is key to understanding how much modern biblical criticism has proceeded within a 'realist' sense of literature. This 'realism' is not neutral and operates on a number of often contradictory levels. On the one hand, the quest for the 'real Jesus of history', for example, can be an attempt to free this historical Jesus from the theological representations of preceding religious authorities; data garnered as far as possible from historical research is the final criterion on thinking about his character and teachings. On the other hand, as Jean-François Lyotard observed, certain forms of artistic and literary realism have the role of "preserving various consciousnesses from doubt,"¹³⁶ reaffirming the lost links between linguistic representation and 'the thing itself', ensuring that all is in good order. However, according to Lyotard, "capitalism inherently possesses the power to derealize familiar objects, social roles, and institutions to such a degree that the so-called realistic representations can no longer evoke reality except as nostalgia or mockery, as an occasion for suffering rather than for satisfaction."¹³⁷ Hence he sees the rise in popularity of

134 Prickett, *Words and The Word: Language, Poetics and Biblical Interpretation*, p. 192.

135 De Certeau, *The Writing of History*, p. xi.

136 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, (trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 74.

137 Ibid.

photography and cinematography as indicative of a desire for a safe and stabilized referential realism that allows the viewer to “arrive easily at the consciousness of his own identity as well as the approval which he thereby receives from others—since such structures of images and sequences constitute a communication code among all of them. This is the way the effects of reality, or if one prefers, the fantasies of realism, multiply.”¹³⁸ How do these fantasies of realism affect biblical scholarship and its disciplinary identities?

Realism, the Real, and Writing

De Certeau understands the paradox of historiography as historians writing “only by combining within their practice the ‘other’ that moves and misleads them and the real that they can represent only through fiction.”¹³⁹ ‘Representing the real through fiction’ might be a tagline for the ongoing discussions between historical-critical and postmodern biblical interpretations that I shall unpack in the final sections of this chapter. Roland Boer’s book engages with this issue and takes Barton’s title *The Nature of Biblical Criticism* further, contending that biblical criticism’s writerly ‘nature’ is based in fiction. His own title, *Novel Histories: The Fiction of Biblical Criticism*, puns on novel, fiction, history and biblical criticism, allowing some of the consignations of *écriture* to circulate. What is important for my discussion here is how Boer questions the writing of biblical criticism, offering a metacommentary on commentary, and arguing that biblical criticism is bound to a literary realism engendered by the assumptions of critical practice in the modern age. In a certain sense, and in another interdisciplinary turn, this type of literature actually makes biblical criticism possible. This takes seriously Barton’s assertion that biblical criticism has always been literary and thus questions how this form of the ‘literary’ operates. This will take me further as I move into arguing that, as this literary realism becomes a moment of crisis, a more nuanced sense of poetic retelling as a (post)modern commentary becomes applicable.

The crux of Boer’s argument is to read Martin Noth’s *The Deuteronomistic History* as a historical novel. It is important not to oversimplify what he is doing with this manoeuvre. He is not suggesting that Noth’s work is an historical novel nor that “the slab of text from Deuteronomy to Kings in the Hebrew Bible is a historical novel”¹⁴⁰ or “assuming or proposing that this stretch of biblical text is the ‘Deuteronomistic History’ (an assumption that is rife in

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ De Certeau, *The Writing of History*, p. 14.

¹⁴⁰ Roland Boer, *Novel Histories: The Fiction of Biblical Criticism* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), p. 13.

Hebrew Bible criticism).¹⁴¹ What Boer wants to emphasize is that Noth's 'Deuteronomic History' "is generated out of the conjunction of both his book and the biblical text, hovering somewhere in between like a hologram, and the product of such a conjunction may be perceived in terms of the historical novel."¹⁴² This is to apply literary terms and concepts to the material product of biblical interpretation, confusing the realist assumptions that commentary simply maps onto the biblical without remainder.

Boer goes further and inserts his own 'fictional' narrative into his interpretation, demonstrating the 'made' nature of commentary and metacommentary.¹⁴³ He is fully aware that broadening the field of biblical studies to include literary and cultural studies brings with it the ludic *pharmakon* of 'non-referential' writing. As I argue above with reference to Barton, the 'literary' has always been the Trojan horse within the city. Indeed, and to change metaphors, it must also be added that the attempt to separate the figurations of literary criticism, critical theory, and biblical studies is extremely difficult. In fact, in a later text, Boer asks "do not contemporary methods of literary and cultural criticism derive ultimately from biblical interpretation?"¹⁴⁴ And, "if this is granted, then any new discipline, any new approach to the Bible is always already contained in the closed system, since these ways of reading owe their ultimate logic to theology and biblical studies."¹⁴⁵ Boer explores how, even within a closed system, the notions of realism, modernism and postmodernism operate as ideologies around textual production, often not replacing one another, but becoming stratified elements impinging on reading in the present. If the Higher Criticism was in large part motivated by a suspicion of the theological or ecclesiastical renderings of biblical 'truth' as I have suggested, then it became important to demystify the texts, to treat their more fantastical elements as 'fictions', or, at the very least, not what 'really happened'. As Boer highlights, the purpose of the historical critical task

141 Ibid., pp. 13–14.

142 Ibid., p. 14.

143 Boer suggests how 'secular' reading methods can be rooted in biblical studies, gleefully stating that "biblical studies has for too long hidden from the consequences of the methods it unwittingly unleashed. And so now it is the revenge on biblical studies that must be enacted." *Knockin' On Heaven's Door: The Bible and Popular Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 5.

144 Ibid.

145 Ibid.

maintains significant links with realism; namely, the need, after all the sifting and realigning of texts has been done, to write a history of Israel or of the early church [...]. Realism shows its face in this task by the assumption that what is finally reconstructed and written has a greater claim to truth than ever the biblical text itself might have. It is as though realist assumptions in biblical criticism have been enveloped within a more comprehensive modernism, realism being not so much effaced as encased by modernism.¹⁴⁶

For Boer, historical-critical exegesis finds itself in a double-bind; its demystifying qualities suggest a strong link with realism, an assumption of “mimetic transparency”¹⁴⁷ between the present writing and the past *sitz im leben*, whilst also following a firmly modernist line of a “surface which conceals myriad and mostly unanticipated elements ‘behind’ or ‘deeper’ than that surface.”¹⁴⁸

Of course, for much postmodern thinking, there is no ‘behind’ or ‘deeper’, no solid or secret reference for the linguistic signifier to finally signify. But Boer is not totally sold on postmodernism either; “what so many have claimed as postmodern in biblical studies—especially the so-called literary methods, reader response theories and even structuralism—is still resolutely modernist, if the emphasis on autonomy in modernism is taken into account.”¹⁴⁹ For Boer, the quest for autonomy becomes an individualism, inseparable from late modernity’s political economics. As such, biblical criticism in any of its guises is materially embedded in such structures and contributes to their construction. This moves the writing of history into the realms of ideological representation (as de Certeau would also acknowledge).

I want to depart from Boer here, even as I acknowledge that the poetic retellings that I will go on to read are also caught in this late-capitalist materialism, not least when the poet is positioned as autonomous artist-extraordinaire. Boer picked at the links between literary realism, romantic-modernist quests for origins, and biblical criticism and, in the next section, these links become part of the debates between George Aichele, Peter Miscal and Richard Walsh, and their respondent John van Seters. I shall use the outworkings of these debates to make my argument for how poetic retelling troubles the ‘real’ in biblical criticism in productive ways, moving interpretation away from a

146 Boer, *Novel Histories: The Fiction of Biblical Criticism*, p. 189.

147 Ibid., p. 182.

148 Ibid., p. 184.

149 Ibid., p. 193.

quest for concrete referents and foregrounding the participative performance of making meaning with biblical material.

Elephants in the Many Rooms of Historical Criticism

Marking the mobility of Bible and its readers once again, George Aichele, Peter Miscall, and Richard Walsh take care to distance their postmodern project from work that appropriates postmodern critique of modernist essentialism and attempts "to 'baptize' postmodernism and to capitalize on current popular terms such as 'postmodern' and 'deconstruction' on behalf of evangelical theology."¹⁵⁰ Having sidestepped any charges of postmodernism as an irrational 'rage against reason,'¹⁵¹ the authors indicate that postmodernist biblical criticism's notable successes have been in feminist and postcolonial studies of the Bible, consistently leading the "way in raising the question of the ethics or politics of interpretation."¹⁵² This renewed emphasis on the ethics of interpretation should, the authors hope, result in a more self-critical and conciliatory conversation between postmodern and historical critics. As they offer,

[a]lthough it may sometimes sound otherwise, it is not our desire to prove that postmodern approaches to biblical texts are always superior to, or can do without the benefits of, historical-critical analyses. Nor do we aspire to overcome the gulf between historical criticism and postmodernism. Rather, we hope to make further conversation between these approaches more acceptable (or even desirable). We try to do this here by reflecting on each of them as exercises in mythmaking.¹⁵³

The fact that there is little conversation between the postmodern and historical-critical parties is the 'elephant in the room' (rather as the relationship between biblical criticism and theology soured, although over a much longer break-up and with occasional flirtations). However, this offer to reflect on the differences in approach between the two parties by analysing these as the different 'myths' by which each operates draws the chagrin of John van Seters. Aichele, Miscall, and Walsh argue that

150 George Aichele, Peter Miscall, and Richard Walsh, "An Elephant in the Room: Historical-Critical and Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128, no. 2 (2009): p. 385.

151 See Richard J. Bernstein, "The Rage Against Reason," *Philosophy and Literature* 10, no. 2 (1986).

152 Aichele, Miscall, and Walsh, "An Elephant in the Room: Historical-Critical and Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible," p. 386.

153 *Ibid.*, p. 387.

historical criticism reveals a deep desire to get back to some original, an *archē* or First Signified, which is always theological or ideological, such as the real Jesus or the actual ancient Israel. This desire is fundamentally Romantic, and, as an expression of modernism, historical criticism is the product of both the Enlightenment and Romanticism. The former is most evident in the frequent attempts by historical critics to arrive at a rational or scientifically grounded self identity. The latter is most evident in historical criticism's nostalgic desire for an *archē*.¹⁵⁴

The authors echo much of what has come before in my analysis and from which the debate is woven. Like Boer, they see historical-criticism as caught in the webs of literary realism, modernism and critical autonomy. The tensions inherent in the formula of Enlightenment-Romanticism also mark the very *archē* of the Higher Criticism's dual desires in the examples of Robert Lowth and J. G. Herder, these two streams of the historical and the literary imagination, always struggling to be autonomous from the author-ity of one another, and yet intimately bound together. The different types of Bible are also present, the historical-critical ensuring that Bible remains document, fragmented and difficult, requiring demystification, and the poetic, that which displays a sublimity of writing that can only be appreciated and responded to by a Romantic imagination.

Van Seters takes great exception to being cast as a mythmaker. As he argues,

the attempt to characterize all historical criticism and scientific investigation as a religious quest for mythical origins is, in my opinion, ludicrous. In fact, such a statement is itself highly ideological. Take the example of 'the actual ancient Israel.' What historical criticism has done, using both literary criticism and the external evidence of archaeology and texts of foreign cultures is to call into question the 'myths' of Israel's origins represented in the biblical texts, whether in the patriarchal stories, or the story of the exodus from Egypt and conquest of the land, or in the rise of a united monarchy in Jerusalem over the peoples of both Israel and Judah.¹⁵⁵

Here, van Seters demonstrates exactly that modernist move that Boer, Aichele, Miscall, and Walsh all highlight—the move to demystify the 'fictional' biblical

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 395.

¹⁵⁵ Seters, "A Response to G. Aichele, P. Miscall and R. Walsh, 'An Elephant in the Room: Historical-Critical and Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible,'" p. 4.

texts with a truer, more real, scientific writing of history. The rupture between textual representation and the really real is what historical criticism performs, and with great success. Van Seters also argues that historical-criticism is not at all the product of Romanticism, instead choosing to root it in antiquity (although this is again a move pre-empted by de Certeau who shows how, for historical writing to begin, a decision on where past departs from present is a highly contested critical moment). Perfected during the Enlightenment, “these concerns had nothing to do with mythical origins, only the desire to rid the texts of scribal corruptions and the deliberate falsification of an ancient author’s work.”¹⁵⁶ Corruption and falsification have always been anathema to the historical-critic whilst also, once identified, providing material on which to exercise the critical faculties. Van Seters goes on to cast postmodernists as “treating the final form of the text in a completely fanciful manner without any concern for its historical context. One could, in fact, characterize such efforts as pre-critical and homiletical, having much more in common with religious exegesis.”¹⁵⁷ The old battle-lines are drawn as the spectre of religious exegesis, the pre-critical, of going-too-far, is invoked. In the second half of the article, van Seters, in attempting to usher postmodernist approaches out the door, suggests that “it is much easier to explain postmodernism on the basis of contemporary literature, from which it largely derives.”¹⁵⁸ For van Seters, postmodernism is *merely* literary; the writing of historical-criticism does not suffer from the same defects.

To underline his point, van Seters compares two fictional retellings of the biblical David, Joseph Heller’s *God Knows* and Stephen Heym’s *The King David Report*. He argues that Heller’s intertextual parody of the David story “is not scholarship and it is certainly not intended as an alternative to historical criticism; it is a novel and is to be read as a novel, and as such I have no difficulty with it. The book is entertainment and as such it is very funny, even if at times it is a little over the top.”¹⁵⁹ The novel wears its fictional elements on its sleeve and is therefore cast as mere entertainment, not troubling at all, even though, as we saw with de Certeau, Heller’s novel might also be characterized as *l’écriture*, that busy word signifying the movement of literature, scripture, and chronicle. For van Seters, Heller is not trying to represent the ‘real’ through fiction; he’s simply writing playful fiction.

156 Ibid., p. 5.

157 Ibid., p. 6.

158 Ibid., p. 8.

159 Ibid., p. 10.

Van Seters has more difficulty with Heym's work, *The King David Report*, because it is much too close for comfort, utilizing as it does some of the results of a historical-critical method. Heym states in an author's note that "The King David Report actually exists. It may be found in the Bible, beginning with 1 Samuel, 6 and ending with 1 Kings, 2."¹⁶⁰ Heym's understanding "that not long after the death of David the story of his life and royal rule must have been patched together from various source materials, and where the several parts refused to fit together, the seams remained visible"¹⁶¹ seems to support Barton's affirmation that biblical criticism has really always been literary. It is this literariness that prompts Heym to believe that his fiction might retrace the steps made in the construction of the biblical text, "the royal annals, army records, letters, eye-witness testimonies, songs and myths"¹⁶² and "lay bare the essence of the King and to make the many-faceted man that David was come alive."¹⁶³

For van Seters the danger with Heym's novel is that "it only works so long as the scholarship about the historical David to which it is tied is viable, but once it has become suspect, then the story of Ethan the historian no longer works. Thus, there is little basis for believing in written documentation and archival sources produced by Saul and Samuel, and David and all his courtiers, which the fictional historian Ethan is said to have used."¹⁶⁴ For this to be a properly historical novel, the literary must be tied in the right way to current scholarship. However, in van Seters' analysis, he tries to ensure that the literary *pharmakon* does not poison the scholarly. Heller is to be favoured because he knowingly performs a parody of biblical interpretation and exegesis. In performing historical-criticism through fiction, Heym's 'historical, biblical, political'¹⁶⁵ writing is too close to how biblical scholarship actually operates in that convergence of history and fiction that de Certeau outlines. Van Seters purports to judge the novel on historical-critical grounds rather than the 'entertainment' value he ascribes Heller, and dismisses it because of its outdated scholarship. This, however, begs a question; if one were to write a historical novel that aligned with van Seters' scholarly apprehensions, fictionalising the

160 Stefan Heym, *The King David Report* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1977), p. 253. Heym's ideas of a 'report' on David are prompted by a German Bible translation published in 1909 by Emil Kautzsch, then professor of theology at the University of Halle.

161 *Ibid.*, p. 254.

162 *Ibid.*

163 *Ibid.*

164 Seters, "A Response to G. Aichele, P. Miscall and R. Walsh, 'An Elephant in the Room: Historical-Critical and Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible,'" p. 12.

165 Heym writes "Opinions might also differ on the question whether *The King David Report* is to be considered a historical novel or a biblical one, or a story of today, charged with political meaning. To me, it is all three." Heym, *The King David Report*, p. 254.

factums obtained through historical-critical methods and thus disallowing the charge of suspect scholarship, would this pass muster? One thinks not; as van Seters argues,

[w]hile there are a few . . . lingering examples in scholarship of how the story of David can be made into history, the time for such efforts has passed. If one wants a good story based upon a close reading of the text, then my preference would certainly be for Heller's novel of David, which, however, makes no pretence to be historical and a scholarly reconstruction of what happened. It is a very witty parody and nothing more.¹⁶⁶

There are a couple of noteworthy points here. Van Seters reverses the hermeneutic flow, suggesting that, although the time has passed for such a process, the story of David has been *made* into history, a history presumably not as realistic as the history that biblical scholars now make from the fictions of the extant biblical documents. The history that biblical scholars make is more real, or at least closer to the probable events. He also notes that Heller's novel is based upon a 'close reading' of the text, invoking a double-term that postmodernists and historical critics both agree on, differing only in the destination this attention to detail takes them. As Aichele, Miscall, and Walsh argue,

[p]ostmodernists do not share the historical-critical desire to resolve the text into an autograph or to clarify its meaning by means of purely hypothetical documents. That is not to say that postmodern critics are indifferent to questions of the history of the text, including the 'corruptions' and 'corrections' to be found in the various surviving manuscripts. Indeed, such evidence that we have of ancient textual alteration often points to instances of textual incoherence that are of great interest to postmodernists.¹⁶⁷

Van Seters' final rejoinder is to observe that what Aichele, Miscall, and Walsh are doing in their own writing is no different to Heller working on David. When he contacted, van Seters notes that they

mostly avoided the issue, but one of them admitted that he had no problem with being compared to a novelist. The strong similarity is, to my

166 Seters, "A Response to G. Aichele, P. Miscall and R. Walsh, 'An Elephant in the Room: Historical-Critical and Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible,'" pp. 12–13.

167 Aichele, Miscall, and Walsh, "An Elephant in the Room: Historical-Critical and Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible," p. 400.

mind, obvious. Yet they all insisted that they were scholars not novelists, unlike, of course, the novelist Heller. This raises, of course, a question of boundaries, since they could not provide me with a single significant instance in which their analysis/narrative differed substantially from that of Heller. Is scholarship to write a novel? Is a novel a work of scholarship?¹⁶⁸

Of course, in this comment is veiled the opinion that van Seters sees Aichele, Miscall, and Walsh's work as, at best, light entertainment, at worst 'pre-critical' and 'homiletical'. He ponders whether some postmodernists "who were trained as scholars aspire (perhaps in a way unbeknownst to them) to be novelists, and their work should be viewed, at least in part, in the same way."¹⁶⁹ As Stephen D. Moore notes, in his experience of the machinations of biblical criticism, "methodology is what is meant to keep our discourse on the Bible from being subjective, personal, private, pietistic, pastoral, devotional, or homiletical. Methodology, in short, is what maintains the partition between sermon and scholarship."¹⁷⁰ Van Seters would argue that it is *correct methodology* that would keep such (postmodern) work from becoming narrative fiction and maintain the epistemological decorum of the Guild. However, Boer's work demonstrated that the ideologies of producing 'realism' are also tied up with modernist and postmodernist models of autonomy and economy and that writing historical narratives explicitly borrows from how novelistic fiction deploys its regimes of signification. Van Seters' dismissal of these fictional elements of historiography is a way of avoiding the 'anguish of writing', the necessarily fraught narrowing of (historical) writing that has to take place in order for writing to signify. Sidelining 'mere fiction' allows historical-criticism to continue its quest for realism.

Where van Seters believes that postmodernist biblical critics want to be novelists, I want to suggest an alternative (though not replacement) creative aesthetic-ethic. As Walter Lowe notes, following a thesis that argues for the 'critical vision' that the Enlightenment-Romantic paradigm might offer to a postmodernism struggling always to break from a residual Romanticism,¹⁷¹ "[f]or those of us concerned, as so many of us are, to break free from the constraints of religious reification, the figure of the poet-prophet can be virtu-

168 Seters, "A Response to G. Aichele, P. Miscall and R. Walsh, 'An Elephant in the Room: Historical-Critical and Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible,'" pp. 12–13.

169 Ibid., p. 10.

170 Stephen D. Moore, "A Modest Manifesto," in *The Bible in Theory: Critical and Postcritical Essays* (Atlanta: SBL, 2010), p. 370.

171 See Lowe, "Christianity and Anti-Judaism," p. 112.

ally irresistible. The philosopher Alain Badiou writes that ‘since Nietzsche, all philosophers claim to be poets, they all *envy* poets, they are all wishful poets or approximate poets [. . .].’¹⁷² With the above debates on the fraught ‘fictions’ of biblical criticism in mind, Stephen Prickett understands that, as contemporary readers, “[w]e are left with the uncomfortable fact that biblical narrative can . . . *neither* be treated as history *nor* as realistic (‘fact-like’) fiction. It is at this point that we turn again to the concept of the ‘poetic.’”¹⁷³

How are the problematics of postmodernist biblical interpretation shifted or solicited (shaken) if poetic retellings of Jacob and the Angel are allowed to act upon my understanding of meaning-making with biblical texts? If the only way that these texts live on is through our being bound to retell and recite them, how does this process of managing different manifestations of biblical authority work in poetic practice? If biblical criticism becomes more aware of poetic interpretation of ‘poetic’ Bibles, what might be gained in the difficult meetings?

With a more nuanced sense of postmodern biblical criticism, I argue that we can only read from the present and it is present concerns that shape what might be done with such texts. If “whatever communication may be possible between writer and reader via private reading of the text cannot be censored or controlled by an intervening history of ecclesiastical reading (or readings),”¹⁷⁴ an argument that tries to free biblical texts from the grip of the church, this is not to finally escape censorship, authority or disciplinary procedures. This ‘private’ space of communication is always already run across with bindings and ligatures that hum like telegraph wires, murmuring with assent and dissent, shaping interpretative possibility, allowing and disallowing sense.¹⁷⁵ Deploying the ‘literary’ and the ‘historical’ in the ways outlined above, especially with a commitment to ‘realism’, broadly understood, make up these interpretative possibilities. In the next chapter, I shall expand my argument for engaging with poems that retell biblical stories and Gen. 32:22–32 in particular, as *parageses* (building on Gary A. Phillip’s notion of intergenesis¹⁷⁶ and J. Hillis Miller’s famous

172 Lowe is quoting Alain Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), p. 70. In Lowe, “Christianity and Anti-Judaism,” p. 115.

173 Prickett, *Words and The Word: Language, Poetics and Biblical Interpretation*, p. 203.

174 Davies, *Whose Bible is it Anyway?* p. 14.

175 And, of course, ‘private’ reading is an interesting historical phenomenon in itself, embedded in modern senses of the autonomous, financially secure self, perhaps ‘with a room of one’s own’ in which to undertake such a private perusal.

176 See Gary A. Phillips, “‘What is Written? How are you Reading?’ Gospel, Intertextuality and Doing Lukewise: Reading Lk 10:25–42 Otherwise,” *Semeia*, no. 69/70 (1995).

essay ‘The Critic as Host’).¹⁷⁷ These *parageses* foreground the act of a creative imagination deployed in trying to make some sense from the murmur and babble thrumming from different lines of communication.¹⁷⁸ Amid this murmur and babble are some surprises. As Emily Dickinson has it in one of her poems that retells Gen. 32:22–32, we begin with a vision:

A little East of Jordan
 Evangelists record
 A Gymnast and an Angel
 Did wrestle long and hard [. . .]

And we end with a shock when

Light swung the silver fleeces
 ‘Peniel’ Hills beyond
 And the bewildered Gymnast
 Found he had worsted God!¹⁷⁹

The interpretative struggles for Gen. 32 ensure that multiple elements in the reading and writing process need to be wrestled with, even through the depths of bewilderment around what such a text means. A poetic paragete may or may not know which authority they are wrestling with and ‘worsting’. Examining this struggle will lead us to the point where the issues of managing and disciplining poetic excess in retellings of a Bible that is always already (at least) double in its canonicity become an important component in arresting the movement of meaning long enough to read and write again.

¹⁷⁷ J. Hillis Miller, “The Critic as Host,” *Critical Inquiry* 3, no. 3 (Spring 1977).

¹⁷⁸ I am not unaware of the irony of seemingly coining a new term for what I am doing; the idea of inventing a new term and concomitant field both plays into the idea of creating original work, in the academic sense, and of keeping the biblical studies machinery turning, by adding yet another critical term. As Moore and Sherwood write, “reader response criticism, ‘deconstructionism’, ideological criticism, and other vaguely postmodernist ‘-isms’ helped to meet the intensified demand for new methods and approaches caused by wear and tear (through overuse) on the old historical-critical machine” and I am not innocent of this demand. Moore and Sherwood, “Biblical Studies ‘after’ Theory: Onwards Towards the Past; Part Three: Theory in the First and Second Waves,” p. 194.

¹⁷⁹ ‘A Little East of Eden,’ in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. R. W. Franklin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press: 1998).

Poetic Paragesis and Disciplining the Imagination

Thus far, I have been mapping out some of the interdisciplinary pressures and influences that construct an ‘ideal’ Bible and the types of critical writing that is exercised upon these Bibles. Chapter one travelled over the ground in which the Bible has been imagined as an authoritative text, constituted by differing forms of authority, always mobile and dancing between the burgeoning disciplinary boundaries that begin to form during the Enlightenment and continue to structure and legitimate epistemological thinking. The important point in this analysis was how, as theological authority waned, a multitude of other ways of surrounding Bible with authoritative discourse arose in sometimes contradictory gestures of defence. Upholding or undermining these authorities continues in work around Bible today. Chapter two was concerned with how scholarly readers and writers situated within different disciplinary spaces have thought with their critical figurations under the constitutive orientating signs of the ‘literary/literature’ and the ‘historical’ and I began to unpack some of the difficulties in attempting to separate the machinations of both. The modernist tensions inherent within the shorthand formula ‘Enlightenment-Romanticism’ have had a profound effect on what such terms have meant and mean now. Realism, through a critical writing that attempts to sidestep (or, more simply, ignore) postmodern difficulties around linguistic representation, has been the critical order of the day. The attempt to avoid the reduction of biblical criticism to a kind of ‘historical fiction’ through an emphasis on scholarly practice animated much of this debate. These chapters have provided a working context for arguing that poetic retellings of biblical material foreground and problematize these debates around interpretative legitimacy.

In this chapter, I shall outline the concept of what I am calling ‘poetic paragesis’ to consolidate the results of thinking through the multiplicities of biblical authority and what this might mean for the process of poetic retelling. I shall be arguing for a kind of postmodern ‘defence of poetry’ that situates the poetic as a literary site where interpretative performances are enacted. I shall attempt not to lose the singular ‘event’ of the poem itself within this framework as I do not want to simply reduce the poem itself to a prooftext for my argument. Attempting to yoke a poem to a proof often falls into a trap that Mark Edmundson highlights when he argues that the “dialogue between poetry and [in the case of his thesis] systematic philosophy is rendered invisible

by stabilizing analyses that presume to put a stop to the mutually animating exchange.”¹ The dialogue is silenced by analysis and I am aware that my own analysis necessarily silences some of the multiple voices demanding to be heard.

After having laid out some of the historical backdrop to the tense relations between poetry, philosophy, and critical scholarship, I shall position the poetic retelling as existing within a necessarily paradoxical relationship. The poet seems to be exiled from the critical centre, a hydra-headed reader and writer who does not perform knowledge correctly and logically, exhibiting the correct ‘epistemological decorum’ to earn the trust of those of a more broadly critical bent. However, due to the (at least) double nature of the biblical—in the case of my argument ‘the biblical’ as existing between historical-critical document and literary-aesthetic writing—the poet also finds herself writing from within a long tradition of appropriation and assimilation of biblical tropes. As I suggest, she is both wandering, exiled outsider *and* articulating, constructive insider, *at the same time*.

This conclusion leads me into laying out some of the lines of what I am imagining as *poetic paragesis*—an interpretative, poetic retelling that both troubles the way in which interpretation and exegesis are performed on Bibles, whilst also participating in an intergenesis, producing a writing that unavoidably and parasitically feeds *from* the biblical material. This ensures that ‘Bible’ lives on as a live concept in both its multiple literary and historical modes, an Other to which creative artists still seem prone to return and reshape.

Poetic Retellings as Poetic Parageses

My analysis in the previous chapter demonstrated that poets are often denigrated in philosophy and biblical criticism as being ‘immoral’ writers, unconcerned with truth, honesty, virtue and so on. In this section I want to continue to explore the contested space of poetry; what are the elements in poetic writing and retelling that result in it being sent into an outer darkness, where hydra-headed readers and writers can wail and gnash their teeth? As we have seen, picturing Lowth and Herder as emblematic of a Higher Criticism that understood both the poetic and the historical as mutually enriching approaches to certain biblical texts, the tension between the two has animated biblical studies and its notion of ‘epistemological decorum’ from the Enlightenments

1 Mark Edmundson, *Literature Against Philosophy, Plato to Derrida: A Defence of Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 51.

onwards. Although this paradoxical 'origin' of the Higher Criticism has been instructive, the paradigms for the poetic (and for 'the historical') have shifted. I would not want to simply argue that appreciating the 'poetry' of Job, for example (as Lowth and Herder emphasized), results in a reader's submission to a sublimely aesthetic text, a view bound up with a certain sense of classical poetics and poetry's ability to transcend historical materialism. As I shall go on to argue, a sense of postmodern poetics and poetry offers the theme of the poet as *bricoleur*, a creative and critical stance that responds to the multi-dimensional aspects of the Bible's place in contemporary culture and provides an example of a reading that has become a writing, a made response that offers itself to be reread and reiterated.

It is important not to conflate the history of philosophical distaste towards the excessive poetic word with biblical criticism's struggle with what has been seen as 'mere' precritical and uncritical religious interpretation. However, the debate is useful to think with and carry over into biblical studies. Metaphysics links both; for biblical criticism to continue its epistemological production, certain trustworthy philosophical grounds around linguistic representation, reference, relations between subject/object, critical stance, logocentric restraint and so on need to be in place. Even with the 'eclipse of biblical narrative' that Hans Frei highlights,² in the last chapter we saw how criticism's roots in the wager of realism is both an aesthetic and metaphysical need to show how things really were and are. The anxiety of writing permeates the debate. For my argument, poetic retellings heighten such anxiety around the referential nature of language and the fear that, even in critical writing, it can go wild and not mean what it was supposed to mean. Critical writing must maintain its epistemological decorum and the thought that the etymology of *exegesis* might be closer to A. K. M. Adam's 'dream interpretation' than John Barton's 'historical guide,'³ is not to be countenanced for meaning is still routinely supposed to lie within the text (rather than in any 'dreamy' reworking). As

2 Frei refers to the way in which biblical narratives, once treated as history, become, through critical work, historically contingent and fragmented. Essentially, and without reducing the important analyses within the book, the biblical texts are acknowledged to have their own history. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*.

3 See Chapter Two, the section entitled 'Arresting the Texts': How are the 'Literary' and 'Historical' Deployed in Biblical Studies? where I cite Adam who notes that where "modern critics delve into the text to get something out of it, we will now acknowledge that meaning—to the extent that there is such a thing—does not inhere in a text any more than it might inhere in a dream (where would it go when you wake up?). Meaning is what we make of texts, not an ingredient in texts." *What is Postmodern Biblical Criticism*, pp. 32–33.

Derrida outlines, “such is the situation of writing within the history of metaphysics: a debased, lateralized, repressed, displaced theme, yet exercising a permanent and obsessive pressure from the place where it remains held in check. A feared writing must be cancelled because it erases the presence of the self-same [*propre*] within speech [...]”⁴ A gap opens between ‘realism’ and its auto-representation in ‘vulgar’ writing. Disciplining the imagination and its vulgar productions becomes a key critical gesture as the *pharmakon* returns.

Why Poetry?

I am bringing poetry into the citadel of biblical studies because its long and difficult relationship with other epistemological frameworks casts light on what is deemed legitimate in theories of knowledge and representation. As we shall see, it is not that ‘paragesis’ is necessarily only practicable through artistic or aesthetic performance but that, because of the position of poetry in critical thinking, it foregrounds the performance of meaning-making. The ‘critical’ is also paragetical but as Edmundson emphasizes, “most of us seem to have forgotten that from the beginning of Western culture, poetry has been on trial, and that by acting exclusively as prosecutors, we do in sophisticated ways what practical, ambitious cultures have always tended to do, if more crudely: discredit what seems to be childish, extravagant, useless, and weird.”⁵ Poetry raises all kinds of unanswered and unanswerable questions and debates around what exactly constitutes poetry, and what poetry is for, continue to animate poets and critics. In his ‘In Memory of W. B. Yeats’, an elegy for both Yeats and poetry, W. H. Auden once famously, and paradoxically, wrote that “[...] poetry makes nothing happen” only to follow with, a few lines later, “[...] it survives, / a way of happening, a mouth.”⁶ With this in mind, I am positioning the poetic retelling of biblical material as a stranger, a foreign way of mouthing, happening, sur-viving (living on) in the field of biblical studies. In this instance, poetry does make something happen, even if only by reaction; by keeping poetic writing outside the city, biblical criticism can react and ‘other’ certain forms of writing (is it scholarship to write a poem?) and maintain its legitimacy as a *modern* ‘scientific’ discipline. My analysis does not aim to undermine this legitimacy but to demonstrate that, from the position of the outside poetic observer, the view is illustrative of how a discipline constitutes itself.

4 Derrida, “The Originary Metaphor,” p. 88.

5 Edmundson, *Literature Against Philosophy, Plato to Derrida: A Defence of Poetry*, p. 66.

6 W. H. Auden, “In Memory of W. B. Yeats,” in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. M. H. Abrams and Stephen Greenblatt (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000).

This position becomes increasingly necessary in an interdisciplinary context, in which one writes both inside and outside *at the same time*, and suffers opprobrium and garners praise accordingly. As Stephen Prickett notes, “the severance of essentially complementary disciplines, inevitable as it may have been, has also left its scars on biblical criticism. It is a bold biblical scholar or theologian who writes on the aesthetics of his or her discipline.”⁷ At bottom however, I suggest that a postmodern poetic approach might be “a possible hermeneutic improvement,”⁸ or, at the very least, provoke an awareness that acknowledges the multiple webs of disciplinary discourse in which meaning is produced.

It is also important to understand that different forms of poetry have different philosophical starting points on the nature of language and poetry’s abilities to represent ‘the world’. For example, in Lowth and Herder’s sense of the poetic, there seemed to be little tension between the poet’s representation of the ‘real’ and that of the philosopher or historian; the latter are simply more direct in their apprehension. But jumping ahead to modern and postmodern poetics there is much more of a sense of the contingencies and ambiguities inherent in language, that language is not simply a means of representing the world but actually contributes to our perception of the meaning or meaninglessness of the ‘real’. For example the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, writers particularly associated with avant-garde tendencies in American poetry during the sixties and seventies, explore the materiality of signifiers, emphasizing disjunction and breaking the ‘natural’ links between word and thing. When Gertrude Stein, a precursor and influence on the movement, wrote “a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose,” she suggested that this was first time the rose had been red since the Romantic period, a time when poets could apparently use language in a more direct fashion. By the modern period, the ‘name of the rose’ evokes an archetype that reaches back to the Romantics. But, at the same time, such verbal repetition begins to undermine the referential relationship between the word ‘rose’ and the image invoked. More and more repetition is needed and the signifier is unhooked through this linguistic insistence. The reader or listener begins to realise this is simply a repetition of a certain sound, with no essential link to the myriad diversity of the things it attempts to name.

The poems I have chosen for my analysis all retell the Jacob and the Angel story with a broadly lyric bent. The modern use of the term ‘lyric poetry’ (classically distinguished from ‘narrative’ or ‘dramatic’ poetry) is riven with

7 Stephen Prickett, “Narrative, Theology and Literature,” *Religion and Literature* 41, no. 2 (Summer 2009): p. 209.

8 Davidson, “S. T. Coleridge,” p. 418.

confusions, overlaps, and hesitations. In many cases, such is the overextension of the 'lyric' that it becomes simply interchangeable with 'poetry'. Although definitions down the centuries have tried to suggest that lyric poetry can be defined by its brevity, its focus on subjective and personal expression, its careful metrical arrangements that support and explain one another as part of a whole, or that the lyric tone demonstrates a kinship with some of the impetus of everyday speech, there are as many exceptions that disprove these definitions as there are poems that fit neatly into them. As the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* has it,

In its modern sense, a lyric is a type of poetry which is mechanically representational of a musical architecture and which is thematically representational of the poet's sensibility as evidenced in a fusion of conception and image. In its older and more confined sense, a lyric was simply a poem written to be sung; this meaning is preserved in the modern colloquialism of referring to the words of a song as its 'lyrics'.⁹

These definitions can only go so far. The lyric is "as old as recorded literature; and its history is that of human experience at its most animated."¹⁰ What such definitions offer is a sense of the 'tone' or 'sensibility' of a lyric poem, a subtle fusion of musicality and the possibility of a speaking subject, sounding out a representative utterance.

This is the angle of approach that I want to take. Whilst the lyric poem does not tend towards the linguistic exuberance of the postmodern poetics of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets or the clever word-images of the Concrete poets, the fusion of 'conception and image' in relation to the biblical material becomes a kind of poetic representation of the interpretative process itself. Whilst not reducible to a critical exegesis, the lyric retelling is a performance that can then be studied to examine a number of interlinked questions around constructions of biblical authority, legitimate knowledge production, and the elements that go into taking a particular ideological stance towards a biblical text.

In order to map this position, I shall take a short detour through the fraught relations between poetry and other cognate disciplines, particularly philosophy and history, for it is in these battle lines that we can see why what is deemed as overtly aesthetic or literary has no place in critical thinking (even if

9 'Lyric' in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, eds. Alex Preminger, Frank J. Warnke and O. B. Hardison, Jr. (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1974), p. 462.

10 Ibid.

all of these concepts have their own narrative figurations and mean differently at different times). Tracing a genealogy for the debate shows what has been at stake in past formulations and shows what might be done differently now. Of course, as we have seen in the previous chapters, the historical relationships between biblical criticism, literary studies, critical theory, and theology do not easily map onto a single family tree; practitioners within each field have different conceptions of which discipline begat which and which is currently in the ascendancy.

The 'Critical Rupture': Asking Questions of Poetry

I have already shown how the constitution of Plato's *Republic* left little room for the poet or tragic dramatist, castigating them as mere imitators whose works "are at the third remove from that which is and are easily produced without knowledge of the truth (since they are only images and not things as they are) [...]." ¹¹ There are important echoes of this view in van Seters' argument that Aichele, Walsh, and Miller seem more akin to novelists than biblical critics, with the implicit charge that they are not taking the methodological claims of biblical criticism seriously enough and what they are producing is not legitimate knowledge. In his own 'defence of poetry', a genre with a long history, Edmundson highlights that "art is an imitation of an imitation, thus it is far removed from the real; it is ineffectual, impotent. Yet, too, art is dangerous in that it challenges reason's supremacy."¹² This 'danger' is significant and, as Edmundson openly admits, within the Enlightenment-Romanticism paradigm that we have identified as at the core of much work done in the (post)modern academy, this challenge is something that the Romantic poets were particularly adept at exercising in the face of reductive philosophies of experience and knowledge.¹³ However, I have difficulties with Edmundson's own reduction of Theory and philosophy to one and the same antagonistic operation against poetry. As I shall go on to show, Theory and poetry have a much more nuanced and instructive relationship than the one Edmundson has in mind.

What Edmundson does highlight, with important implications for poetry's non-place within biblical studies, is that philosophical practice introduces

¹¹ Plato, "Republic," p. 177.

¹² Edmundson, *Literature Against Philosophy, Plato to Derrida: A Defence of Poetry*, p. 7.

¹³ He writes that, in this book, 'poetry' is used "as something of a synecdoche, a part for the whole. The word should be understood as referring to any cultural creation that fruitfully exceeds destructive norms and passes beyond theory's reductive explanatory powers. The main exemplars of renovating work here will be the Romantic poets..." Ibid., p. 28. This is 'poetry' in a much extended sense.

an important *critical*¹⁴ rupture in poetic discourse. Pointing to a “key gesture that Socrates deploys in prosecuting his case against the poets,”¹⁵ Edmundson understands that, if the recitation of a Homeric poem was about the speaker and the audience becoming immersed in the seemingly pure present moment of narrative, philosophy arrests “the poem’s motion by asking a critical question. Coming upon an event in which, by the poet’s or a character’s account, someone acts justly, you pause and inquire not what is just about this act, but what justice is per se. The phrase *kath’ auto*, ‘in itself’, may, Eric Havelock suggests, be the crucial verbal turn in Plato’s polemic against the poets.”¹⁶ Abstract thought interrupts the aesthetic movement and everything then becomes structured along the lines of this question, arresting the overflow of writing and speech; the question becomes critical and “you become a knower with an object of knowledge.”¹⁷ As Derrida puts it, the question “‘What is . . .?’ laments the disappearance of the poem—another catastrophe. By announcing that which is just as it is, a question salutes the birth of prose.”¹⁸

In many ways, this mirrors the debates in biblical studies between literary or theological ‘final forms’ and historical-critical textual analysis. Where some might read Gen. 32:22/23–32/33 as an entire text, a vignette that holds together for the duration of its reading, a critic such as Claus Westermann reads those moments where the literary does not hold, where, for him, the critical rupture enters in the form of a ‘prosaic’ question.

I want to utilize the King James Version of the scene here to demonstrate the contrast between the ‘poetic’ Bible (akin to reading a Homeric vignette, to use Edmundson’s framework) and the necessary rupture of asking critical questions of this text. John Barton argues that critics “try to read each text as cohering; but when that fails, they resort to theories of fragmentation.”¹⁹ A reading of the ‘final form’, now so often linked with a literary aesthetic as in Robert Alter and Frank Kermode’s *Literary Guide to the Bible*, is halted by the desire to ask how these texts are constructed, why they do not seem to make sense on immediate terms and what they might mean ‘in themselves’ without addition or accretion. As Westermann demonstrates, at the end of his commentary on this episode,

14 From Gk. *krinein*—to separate, to decide.

15 Edmundson, *Literature Against Philosophy, Plato to Derrida: A Defence of Poetry*, p. 12.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Jacques Derrida, “Che cos’è la poesia?,” in *Poetry in Theory: An Anthology 1900–2000*, ed. Jon Cook (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 537.

19 Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism*, p. 44.

[t]he narrative 32:23–33 has since ancient times given occasion for profound and extensive theological explanations. Most of these take their stand on vv. 28f, 31b, or 26b, that is, *on the additions*, the presupposition being that the narrative as a whole is to be understood from them. But following the explanation given here that is no longer possible. V. 26b belongs to the addition, v. 33 which is a late accretion. The addition, vv. 28f, is very close both in time and content to the changes of name due to P; the change in name of the place, v. 31b, is not integrated. The theological meaning of these additions is to be studied each *in itself*, and the theological meaning of the narrative *without the additions*. The narrative of Jacob's struggle at the Jabbok that the Yahwist inserted here was the old narrative without vv. 26b, 28–29 in their present form, and with v. 33. What J wanted to say by inserting 32:23–33 here, thus breaking the connection between Gen. 32 and 33, is to be sought in the meaning that the narrative had *without the additions*. It was neither Yahweh nor the God of his father who attacked Jacob at the ford, but the river demon who wanted to stop him from crossing.²⁰

Westermann is not atheological in his criticism. In many ways his fragmenting of the text into constituent parts is a desire for different theological motifs to be sought, particularly when, as he argues, this interruption between Gen. 32 and 33 needs to be explored without the additions. All I want to note at this point is the family resemblance of this critical 'crisis', where a narrative is arrested, halted, in order to ask philosophical or historical-literary questions of its material.

Where, then, is the 'danger' in a poetic retelling of this narrative? To return to a genealogy of the troublesome relations between representation-as-mimesis (as attempted in the vulgar writing of philosophy and history) and poetry, Gerald Bruns sees philosophy's task as to "preside over the open, taking the measure of what is, fixing things in place, but poetry is a turning loose. Or, in short, poetry is foundational but not philosophical: it does not try to bring things under control; rather it lets them go, lets them turn this way and that, luxuriates in ambiguity. But philosophically this is madness."²¹ In a phrasing

20 Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–36: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion S.J. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985), pp. 520–521. My emphasis. N. B. Westermann is using the Masoretic numbering of this material. In this instance this is one count on from the numbering of the KJV.

21 Gerald L. Bruns, *Hermeneutics: Ancient and Modern* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 233.

that echoes some of the reasons that postmodernism's detractors deem it to be meaningless, Bruns acknowledges that "poetry seems to institute . . . ambiguity or misrule, as if poetry were some sort of antiprinciple principle, or as if there were some internal or even metaphysical link between poetry and anarchy [...]."²² Poetry has been a problem "at least since Plato precisely because its reality was as questionable as the morality of its depictions; its practice was subject to charges of irrationality, irrelevancy, and immorality. Criticism was born from the act of apology provoked by such responses."²³

Renaissance apologists such as Philip Sidney attempted to answer these charges by arguing that "Poesy, therefore is an art of imitation, for so Aristotle termeth it . . . that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth; to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture, with this end—to teach and delight."²⁴ Imitation, in Sidney's sense is not at the third remove but offers access, through a 'speaking picture', to a clear and illuminated image of what the moral philosopher and the historian can only hint at: "Therefore compare we the poet with the historian and the moral philosopher; and if he go beyond them both, no other human skill can match him."²⁵ For Sidney, the philosopher's knowledge is

so hard of utterance and so misty to be conceived . . . standeth so upon the abstract and general that happy is the man who may understand him, and more happy that can apply what he doth understand. On the other side, the historian, wanting the precept, is so tied, not to what should be but to what is, to the particular truth of things and not the general reason of things, that his example draweth no necessary consequence, therefore is a less fruitful doctrine.²⁶

Sidney goes on to argue that "Now does the peerless poet perform both,"²⁷ by giving a perfect speaking picture, universal and helpfully clear.

Sidney is drawing upon classical ideas of poetry from Longinus, Quintilian, and Horace. In *On the Sublime*, Longinus describes the immediacy or urgency

²² Ibid., p. 229.

²³ Joseph Campana, "On Not Defending Poetry: Spenser, Suffering, and the Energy of Affect," *PMLA* 120, no. 1 Special Topic: On Poetry (January 2005): p. 34.

²⁴ Philip Sidney, *The Defense of Poesy*, ed. Albert S. Cook (Chicago & London: Ginn & Company, 1890), p. 9.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 15.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

in poetic language that “‘introduce[s] events in past time as happening in the present moment’ and ‘makes the audience feel themselves set in the thick of danger.’”²⁸ As Joseph Campana explains, “while both Longinus and Quintilian stress the value of sympathetic participation, Quintilian requires that this emotional state be evoked solely by visual means, for by bringing a scene before the eyes, one can not only harness powerful emotion but also put to good use the ‘mental vice[s]’ of idle daydreaming and wishful thinking.”²⁹ What is important here is the way in which poetry is seen by apologists like Sidney (following the classical writers) to be a source of ‘teaching and delight’, both *heuristic* and *aesthetic*. The charge of ‘counterfeiting’ is sidestepped and the poetic imagination is refigured as offering a ‘true lie’, a way of imagining what is absent through invention and discovery. As we shall see below, Old Testament critic Izaak J. de Hulster uses the former heuristic element in his conception of a systematic application of imagination in biblical studies, but ensures that the latter aesthetic element remains subjected to methodological checks and balances. In a similar way to Barton’s invocation of the ‘literary’ in biblical studies opening the door for the *pharmakon* of literary writing to enter, I will argue that, in Hulster’s particular invocation of the ‘imagination’, an allied desire of disciplining the poetic imagination is present.

Sidney’s recitation and recapitulation of the classical writers and thinkers on poetry links directly back to the central figure of Robert Lowth once more. Lowth echoes Sidney in his understanding that poetry is “commonly understood to have two objects in view, namely, advantage and pleasure, or rather an [sic] union of both.”³⁰ It is Lowth’s sense that

the philosopher and the poet, indeed, seem principally to differ in the means by which they pursue the same end . . . The one proceeds to virtue and truth by the nearest and most compendious ways; the other leads to the same point through certain deflections and deviations, by a winding but pleasanter path. It is the part of the former so to describe and explain these objects, that we must necessarily become acquainted with them;

28 Campana, “On Not Defending Poetry: Spenser, Suffering, and the Energy of Affect,” p. 37. Campana is quoting from Longinus, *On the Sublime*, trans. W. H. Fyfe (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 25–26.

29 Campana, “On Not Defending Poetry: Spenser, Suffering, and the Energy of Affect,” p. 37. Cf. Quintilian, *The Orator’s Education: Books 6–8*, trans. Donald Russell (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

30 Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, p. 4.

it is the part of the latter so to dress and adorn them, that of our own accord we must love and embrace them.³¹

The heuristic element of poetry (imaginative thought as the process of discovery) is a major theme here. Although poetry deflects and deviates along a 'pleasanter path', perhaps wandering the wooded byways outside Plato's city-republic whilst the noble philosopher takes the direct highway into the polis, Lowth sees both as ending up at the same destination—transhistorical, illuminated thought. It is telling that he wants philosophy and poetry to work together in discovery and invention in equal share. Equality has rarely been the name of the game. As Bruns highlights, in his *Poetics*, "Aristotle understood that a less draconian method of getting rid of poetry would be to redescribe it so as to make it a systematic part of philosophy."³² Even though he would seem to be offering more leeway to the creative arts than his teacher Plato, for Aristotle,

[t]he idea is, first, to read poetry so as to count it, in some sense as knowledge, that is, as connecting us up, in some hypothetical fashion, with reality; and second, it is to lay bare poetry's deep structure so as to say that it has a kind of necessary consecutiveness about it and therefore can be made to work as a kind of reasoning, say a logic of discovery. So it is no trouble to get poetry to meet the claims of justice and necessity. The concepts of mimesis and plot, one might say, have no other justification.³³

For Aristotle, the designation 'poet' was problematically broad: "Even when a treatise on medicine or natural science is brought out in verse, the name of poet [maker] is by custom given to the author; and yet Homer and Empedocles have nothing in common but the metre, so that it would be right to call the one poet, the other physicist rather than poet."³⁴ In attempting to narrow this range of meaning, Aristotle situates tragic drama and poetry, as higher types than comedy, as a branch of moral philosophy. Character, as agents imitating action, opens onto 'thought', "the faculty of saying what is possible and pertinent in given circumstances."³⁵ Within the imitative action of dramatic poetry, thought "is found where something is proved to be or not to be, or a general

31 Ibid.

32 Bruns, *Hermeneutics: Ancient and Modern*, p. 230.

33 Ibid.

34 Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. S. H. Butcher (New York: Dover Publications, 1997), p. 2.

35 Ibid., p. 13.

maxim is enunciated.”³⁶ By “giving it a logic and a power of cognition, Aristotle was following the ancient and abiding rule of allegory, which is that if a poetic text is scandalous with respect to reason, we must rewrite it or, much to the same point, find a way of reading it that removes the scandal.”³⁷ Here we see how Lowth’s attempt to make the relationship between poetry and philosophy one of equals in accessing thought and meaningful discourse seems to have always already been undermined by philosophical method having the upper hand. Aristotelian analysis, yoking poetry to philosophy in its explanatory and systematizing power, makes poetry able to *illuminate* philosophical concepts rather than trouble their metaphysical construction.

The close relationship between literature and philosophy becomes even more telling in Romantic thought and, to many critics, it is romanticism’s persistent legacy with which we are still wrestling today. In an influential study on this inescapable persistence, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy demonstrate how early German romanticism, particularly as recorded in the short-lived journal *Athenaeum*, inaugurates the project of collapsing the distinction between ‘theory’ or philosophy and literature. For the writers and thinkers collecting around the university city of Jena³⁸ and, later, Berlin, the project is “*theory itself as literature* or, in other words, literature producing itself as it produces its own theory. The literary absolute is also, and perhaps above all, this absolute *literary operation*.”³⁹ As Friedrich Schlegel, the driving force behind *Athenaeum*, wrote in his *Critical Fragments*:

115. The whole history of modern poetry is a running commentary on the following brief philosophical text: all art should become science and all science art; poetry and philosophy should be made one.

[...]

117. Poetry can only be criticized by way of poetry. A critical judgment of an artistic production has no civil rights in the realm of art if it isn’t itself a work of art, either in its substance, as a representation of a necessary

36 Ibid.

37 Bruns, *Hermeneutics: Ancient and Modern*, pp. 230–231.

38 This group, formed early in 1798, included besides the Schlegel brothers, the writer Tieck, theologian and philosopher Schleiermacher, and, somewhat later, the poet Novalis. As their work developed others, including the poet and philosopher Schiller, and the Idealist philosophers Schelling and Fichte became influential friends and dialogue partners.

39 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (New York: SUNY Press, 1988), p. 12. Emphasis in original.

impression in the state of becoming, or in the beauty of its form and open tone, like that of the old Roman satires.⁴⁰

The poetic power of literature generates *Einführung*, an imaginative understanding that unites poetry and philosophy, science and art, chiming with the work of Lowth and Herder. However, there is also a sense here of the invention of literature as a total subject, where *poiesy* is not so much poetry but, through its etymology, *production*. This is a much broader project than a mere literary 'genre' and "less concerned with the production of the literary thing than with *production*, absolutely speaking. Romantic poetry sets out to penetrate the essence of poiesy, in which the literary thing produces the truth of production in itself, and thus [...] the truth of the production *of itself*, of autopoiesy."⁴¹

This is part of the intoxicating danger of the romantic impetus—a closed loop of production or invention, where literature produces itself at the same time as producing cultivated 'selves'. Paul de Man charts the persistence of romanticism in modernity around a series of necessary delusions; "the illusory autonomy of the self, and the subsequent priority of the problem of the subject considered in and by itself over the problems of the self considered in relation to other entities—other subjects as well as things."⁴² If the term romanticism has any historical relevance it is that these delusions are "particularly strong at the so-called romantic period: romantic individualism, the cult of the self as the independent and generative center of the work, the Promethean claim to confer upon the human will absolute attributes reserved to divine categories of Being [...],"⁴³ all elements that lead to the work of art or, as we have seen, *literature*, understood as a "self-engendered world of the subject's own making."⁴⁴ In relation to this self-referential thinking, the fallacy of the belief that, "in the language of poetry, sign and meaning can coincide or, at least be related to each other in the free and harmonious balance that we call beauty is said to be a specifically romantic delusion."⁴⁵

40 Friedrich Schlegel, "Critical Fragments", in *Friedrich Schlegel's Lucinde and the Fragments*, ed. and trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), p. 157.

41 Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*, p. 11.

42 Paul De Man, *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism*, eds. E. S. Burt, Kevin Newmark, and Andrzej Warminski (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. 6.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid., p. 13.

What Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy and de Man recognize is that romanticism is inescapable, that the thought opened up by this raggedly defined movement, period, impetus or, more simply, *literature*, has left critical thinking with a pervasive legacy. As Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy emphasize,

what interests us in romanticism is that we still belong to the era it opened up. The present period continues to deny precisely this belonging, which defines us (despite the inevitable divergence introduced by repetition). A veritable romantic *unconscious* is discernible today, in most of the central motifs of our 'modernity'. Not the least result of romanticism's indefinable character is the way it has allowed this so-called modernity to use romanticism as a foil, without ever recognizing—or in order not to recognize—that it has done little more than rehash romanticism's discoveries.⁴⁶

This analysis has major implications for my positioning of poetic retellings of biblical narratives as I attempt a careful balance between poetic production and poststructuralist performance. As we have seen in Coleridge's thought, although his notion of poetry's 'esemplastic' power to become a space of synthetic reason is romantic through and through, there is also an 'anguish' around language's inability to finally refer to a really real. *Arche*-writing continues to resist a final logocentrism and we have to read again.

I want to argue that a poetic retelling is an example of a writing that registers a reading of biblical material, discovering and inventing⁴⁷ meaning in the encounter between writer and Bible. So far, so romantic. But, as a record of the event, such a poem then offers itself as a paragetical text, a text that may be read alongside, within and outwith the biblical, crossing the boundaries between biblical content, critical exegesis and imaginative reception. The poem adds more text, foregrounding and dispelling the myth of a final interpretation.

In addition, as Theodor Adorno acknowledges, "the lyric work is always the subjective expression of a social antagonism."⁴⁸ As such, the space of literature is one in which a subject is created by and engages with the assumptions of a given social milieu. Adorno goes on:

46 Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*, p. 15.

47 Both words have their etymological roots in the Latin *invenire*.

48 Theodor W. Adorno, "On Lyric Poetry and Society," in *Notes to Literature*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 45.

For language itself is something double. Through its configurations it assimilates itself completely into subjective impulses; one would almost think it had produced them. But at the same time, language remains the medium of concepts, remains that which establishes an inescapable relationship to the universal and society.⁴⁹

Reading a lyric poem that retells biblical material opens onto questions beyond the subject; because it is constructed from language and concepts inescapably related to the social life beyond the world of the poem, it becomes possible to chart the productive tensions inherent in the work as an example of a form of cultural history of 'the biblical'.

However, in attempting to theorize such an encounter, might it not be suggested that I am falling into the imbalanced and long-running negotiation that disallows the poetic by asking critical questions, invoking the critical rupture that halts the poetic, as I have explored above? In the necessarily interdisciplinary nature of my work, the persistent danger is yoking poetry (through that diminutive yet consigning conjunction 'and') to disciplines that have more 'epistemological decorum' in order to try and find a place at the critical, academic table. As Bruns highlights, for its critics, "poetry is *poiēsis*, a craft of language, a branch of rhetoric concerned with verification and the use of figures: in short, a school subject. Poetry has no matter intrinsic to itself but draws its meaning from philosophy, theology, and history."⁵⁰

I will turn this conclusion to my advantage. If its critics have seen poetry as an 'empty' writing, feeding on the content of other disciplines, then it would seem to be situated in the perfect parasitical space of interpretation. As we shall see, conjunctions such as 'and' (which, as the Hebrew *vav*, might also be translated as a more antagonistic 'but') are often a survival technique, a way for a discipline or a text to live on in a necessarily parasitical relationship with another. In order to argue this point for a repositioning of poetry in biblical studies, I want to make another brief detour, this time into contemporary discussions of the relationships between poetry and literary theory. As I noted at the head of this section, Edmundson sees philosophy's undermining of poetry as carried over into Theory. However, as I have consistently demonstrated, the dances between disciplines and modes of thought, now constituting one another, now breaking away, as with literary criticism, biblical criticism, and critical theory, are complex and multi-faceted. Here, I want to examine whether 'theory' really is such an enemy of poetry, or whether I can utilize work from the domain of

49 Adorno, "On Lyric Poetry," p. 43.

50 Bruns, *Hermeneutics: Ancient and Modern*, p. 231.

theory to enhance my own argument for poetic retellings as a legitimate form of biblical interpretation and reception.

Poetry in Theory

For this section, I take a special issue of *Publications of the Modern Languages Association (PMLA)* as one guide to the contemporary debate between poetry and theory. Bruce R. Smith, in his position as editor, included the question that was set to which interested parties could respond; the question was phrased thus:

Although many psychoanalytic and poststructuralist theories are grounded in poetic discourse, critics who invoke these paradigms have seemed reluctant to take poems as objects of analysis. Has the time come to revisit the relevance of poetry and the pleasures of the poetic text in this changed interpretative universe?⁵¹

As he highlights, “one hundred twenty-nine MLA members thought so. The number of submissions was the largest ever received for a special topic in PMLA.”⁵² In an echo of the above debate, framed by Philip Sidney and Robert Lowth, and circling the heuristic/aesthetic binary, Smith underlines the binaries that brought this issue of *PMLA* to pass: poetry/theory; pleasure/critique; and, following John Keats, beauty/truth.⁵³ And yet, “after the death of the author and the death of the subject, poetry would appear to be a troubling if not downright embarrassing anachronism”⁵⁴ even though paradoxically, as Smith underlines, “all the dominant critical methodologies of the twentieth century—psychoanalytic theory, Marxism in its western European varieties, new historicism, and deconstruction—began in engagements with poetry.”⁵⁵

51 Bruce R. Smith, “Introduction: Some Presuppositions,” *PMLA* Vol. 120, no. 1 Special Topic: On Poetry (January 2005): p. 9.

52 Ibid.

53 See *ibid.*, pp. 9–10.

54 Ibid., p. 10.

55 Ibid. Smith notes that Freud took his fundamental proposition that ‘hunger and love are what move the world’ from Friedrich von Schiller’s poem ‘Die Weltreisen’; that Lacan demonstrates his thesis that the signifier always exceeds the signified by turning to Paul Valéry’s poem ‘Au platane’; and that “poems by John Ashbery, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and William Wordsworth provide occasion for the dialogue among Harold Bloom, Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, Geoffrey Hartman, and J. Hillis Miller in *Deconstruction and Criticism* (1979), a book that can be credited with putting deconstruction on the map in American universities.” See Smith, “Introduction: Some Presuppositions,” pp. 10–11.

Here, again, we can see how the thinking behind 'poiesy' is saturated with romanticism, so much so that after poststructuralism, poetry would seem to be left out in the cold. With this in mind, Smith refigures the relationship between critical theory and poetry as one that is not in opposition (Theory *on* poetry) but as one that is based on a different preposition, *towards*:

At bottom, theory would seem to engage the intransitive sense of *on*. *Theōria* in Greek and Latin is related to *theater*, *theoria* involves looking *at* something, speculating *about* it, being *outside* it, being *above* it. In Greek, *theōria* could also be what you saw from that detached vantage point . . . Being opposite something would seem, from this evidence, to be a requirement for theory and for theorizing. In ancient Athens, a theor was someone sent out from the city to perform a religious rite or carry out a religious duty. A theor was, for the purposes of the mission, an outsider. The theorists in this special topic in PMLA are, by contrast, movers *toward*. The *on* in 'On Poetry' is transitive.⁵⁶

Theory is *not* at a remove from the reading and writing events it is attempting to observe and report upon. Smith picks up on the fact that Theory makes a movement *towards* that with which it is writing. To extend this point further, I shall argue below that the ideas clustering around the concept of the parasite are useful in understanding the embedded nature of a poetic retelling and the ways in which they are bound into decisions on what kind of Bible it is they are reading and writing upon, and what kind of canonical boundaries they are invoking or crossing during the process. In these senses, the 'theory' of poetry I am using is that poetry is indeed a theoretical *outsider* in biblical studies, sent outside the city to perform elsewhere. This is an important stance for the productive tensions that I trace through these retellings. However, the poems I use also move *towards* that which they are writing with, observing from in close proximity. But the danger of this poetry is that these poems are also written from *within*. This is because of the (at least) double canonicities of the biblical that can be traced back to the bifurcations of 'the Enlightenment Bible'. As literary monument, the biblical texts are already inhabited by poets who use these 'templates' for their own retelling. As historical and documentary materials, the poets must be excised from this material for criticism to follow its proper course.

The poetic is present in biblical criticism. Paradoxically, however, this is through its exclusion as a deciding factor in meaning-making. The ideological commitment of most biblical criticism is necessarily toward the epistemology

56 Smith, "Introduction: Some Presuppositions," p. 12.

of historical realism. But if a text is strange and incomprehensible, the desire for meaning suggests that more (con)texts must be brought into the imaginative construct. Some of these contexts are deemed legitimate. As we shall see in Izaak J. de Hulster's piece, the poetic imagination enters as that which must be excluded. Where Keats saw the possibility of a 'negative capability', able to think diverse, uncertain and contradictory things at once "without reaching after fact and reason,"⁵⁷ much biblical criticism proceeds by disallowing this extensive semiotic repertoire, a troublesome plenitude of signs that might undermine the legitimate 'trustworthy' meanings discovered in biblical studies. So the intertext may occur, but it is a kind of negative intertextuality, one that resists the fusion or grafting of the foreign onto the proper.

In formulating my ideas around poetic paragesis, I shall return to these issues of foreigner/familiar, outside/insider and the important approaches and stance a stranger can offer to a disciplinary constitution. Of course, being halted by a stranger as one tries to cross a river-boundary is a major theme of the material around which this book circles and which will be introduced at the end of this chapter. But crossing boundaries is never as easy or simple as some of the more clichéd writings collected under the name of the postmodern attest. Disciplines need to be disciplined. And the persistent danger of the poetic imagination infiltrating a critical discipline needs to be averted. How might this be practiced?

Disciplining the Imagination in Biblical Studies

As much as Lowth emphasized that the biblical and contemporary worldviews are separated by history, he also argued that this distance could be overcome; if "history treats of things and persons which have been in actual existence; the subjects of poetry are infinite and universal."⁵⁸ If we fast-forward 250 years or so, we find Izaak J. de Hulster attempting something similar (albeit without using the word 'poetry') with a "systematic application of 'imagination' in hermeneutics and Old Testament Studies,"⁵⁹ arguing that "imagination employed to reconstruct the background of texts can build on common emotions and insights, since both readers nowadays and the people among whom

57 John Keats, "Letter to Brothers [21 Dec. 1817]," in *Romanticism: An Anthology*, ed. Duncan Wu (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), p. 1351.

58 Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, p. 8.

59 Izaak J. de Hulster, "Imagination: A Hermeneutical Tool for the Study of the Hebrew Bible," *Biblical Interpretation*, no. 18 (2010): p. 114.

the text was first communicated are all human beings.”⁶⁰ The text is not an impediment but a heuristic bridge into a reconstructed and analogous past. In order to show how textual references to gravity and its effect on millstones have a transhistorical truth, Hulster cites the famous watermelon experiment (published in the journal of the Biblical Archaeology Society) which

provides another example of imagining ‘how things were.’ By taking a watermelon, calling it Abimelech, putting it in a position implied in Judges 9 and having women throwing upper mill stones, the experiment proved that throwing a mill stone from a wall on to the head of a person could have a mortal effect. Thus the experiment shows that the situation related in Judges 9:53–54 can be imagined to have happened in the way described.⁶¹

Although the tongue-in-cheek experiment did have the serious aim of showing that, against disputes from other scholars, small millstones used for grinding flour *could* be lifted by women, be conceivably situated at the top of the Tower of Shechem, and cause a mortal blow to the head, there is still the firm basis of historical realism in this historical ‘imaginary’. In this way, imaginative reconstruction can thus be seen as a form of time-travel, to attempt “to reconstruct the imagination of the people who composed the biblical text(s), which is approximate to the imagination of those among whom the text was first communicated.”⁶² However, this sounds like the intentional fallacy being repackaged under the name of a ‘historical imagination’, the imagination serving historical criticism and the eternal search for origins and contexts, to imagine the *what was* rather than the *as if*. Proving (through the ‘historical imagination’) that the persons who both composed and first received what we now know as Judges were aware, as we are, that dropping a millstone on somebody’s cranium might cause them mortal harm does not really prove an awful lot. Attempting to prove what the authors of Gen. 32:22–32 imagined they were writing and then, later, collating, is a much more difficult example to which Hulster’s ‘historical imagination’ might not be so easily applied.

Hulster does admit in his essay that there are different ways of using the imagination but I want to assert that in an interdisciplinary context, the history of ideas around the imagination highlights the tensions in his use of the

60 Ibid., pp. 119–120.

61 Ibid., p. 120. Hulster is citing the work of D. D. Herr and M. P. Boyd, ‘A Watermelon Named Abimelech’, *BAR* 28.1 (2002): pp. 34–7, 62.

62 Hulster, ‘Imagination: A Hermeneutical Tool for the Study of the Hebrew Bible’, p. 130.

concept. As philosopher Richard Kearney points out, this dichotomy “at the heart of the human ability to ‘image’ or ‘imagine’ something has been understood in two main ways throughout the history of Western thought—1) as a *representational* faculty which reproduces images of some pre-existing reality, or 2) as a *creative* faculty which produces images which often lay claim to have an original status in their own right.”⁶³ The tensions between the two can be seen in the connotations of the Latin, *invenire*, to contrive, create or fabricate *and* to discover or find. As we have seen, this imitative capacity of the poetic imagination was what so troubled Plato and Aristotle.

Of course, in much modern and postmodern thought, this representational faculty of the imagination to produce knowledge of ‘that which is’ has become intensely problematic. Kearney offers a succinct overview of a history of the imagination that is useful to think with (even though we should be suspicious of ‘succinct overviews’ of anything as complex as the history of the imagination!). The premodern biblical, classical and medieval imaginations can be imagined as *mimetic*, ‘mirroring’ or imitating the prior acts of a Creator-God with the artist seen as a *craftsman*. As we have seen, the modern imagination is *productive*, a lamp centred in the Romantic-Enlightenment individual casting light into the shadows of obscurity, with the autonomous artist cast as an *inventor* and producer of meaning. The postmodern imagination might be imagined as a *parodic* paradigm, caught up in a labyrinth of shimmering looking-glasses, casting the artist or creative thinker as a *bricoleur*, playing around with meaning she herself has not created.⁶⁴

In his article, Hulster would like to retain the heuristic and representational elements of a historical imagination in biblical studies, situated somewhere between the mimetic and productive senses, and try to overcome the levels of remove from the historical events. However, as Hulster outlines, tacitly acknowledging the dangerous deceits and ‘erroneous judgements’ that the poets and artists can invoke in their productive and parodic imaginations, a historical imagination should be: “1) controlled by proper knowledge . . . [which] requires *study*,”⁶⁵ 2) empathetic with the historical events of the text which “requires *skill*,” and, 3) demonstrate the prerequisite unbiasedness, allowing the text to speak for itself, requiring “*honesty*, including an awareness of one’s perspective and the reason or occasion (in the present) to relate to the past.”⁶⁶

63 Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination: Toward a Postmodern Culture*, p. 15.

64 See *ibid.*, pp. 12–13, 16.

65 Hulster, “Imagination: A Hermeneutical Tool for the Study of the Hebrew Bible,” p. 177.

66 *Ibid.*, p. 117.

What is telling are the ways in which the creative elements, the *poesis* of the imagination, have here been circumscribed and disciplined. After celebrating the effects of the intuition and imagination, there is a disciplinary cringe, and Hulster reiterates that “every association and suggestion, everything that intuition and imagination bring, should be checked methodologically.”⁶⁷ Methodology necessarily steps in to guard against the chaos that using the term ‘imagination’ might have invoked. Methodology is “what is meant to keep our discourse on the Bible from being subjective, personal, private, pietistic, pastoral, devotional, or homiletical. Methodology, in short, is what maintains the partition between sermon and scholarship.”⁶⁸ Methodology arrests the imagination once its heuristic, historical work has been done and before it becomes unverifiable fancy and creative speculation.

Imagining the Facts

As I explored in the first chapter the Romantics and Idealists saw human imaginative capabilities as the poised centre-point of the universe. For a poet-philosopher like Coleridge, the creative imagination provided a hard-won unity between feeling and knowledge. This kind of thinking ushered in poetry in an extended sense, suggested by the problems of translating the German Idealists into English. According to Stephen Prickett, where “the word . . . *dichterish*, refers more specifically to verse and imaginative writing in a technical sense . . . *poetisch* rapidly acquired the universal, abstract, and spiritualized flavour that . . . is so typical of the ‘extensive’ use of the word in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.”⁶⁹ In some ways, Lowth conflated the historical and poetic imaginations, utilizing poetics to overcome historical distance between readers and texts in the second sense generated by the word *poetisch*. With this in mind, according to Kearney, “modern philosophers developed the basic understanding of imagination as *presence-in-absence*—the act of making what is present absent and what is absent present”⁷⁰—while reversing the classical fears around “imagination’s prowess to *fashion* truth rather than merely represent it.”⁷¹ For Hulster, the historical imagination can make what is absent present (a project much historical criticism has pursued) whilst also being

67 Ibid., p. 116.

68 Moore, “A Modest Manifesto,” p. 370.

69 Prickett, *Words and The Word: Language, Poetics and Biblical Interpretation*, p. 83.

70 Richard Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining: Modern to Postmodern* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), p. 3.

71 Ibid., p. 5.

aware that this imagination must be disciplined into trying to *represent* truth rather than *fashioning* it.

A key move comes in the philosopher Edmund Husserl and other phenomenologists acknowledging the image as an *act* of consciousness rather than simply an object in consciousness.⁷² This imagination is not a passive receiver of objects, but is bound in active relation to what is being imagined. For the Romantics in particular, this sense of a *participatory* imagination is profoundly significant—poetic imagination is not an escape from reality but helps to constitute it, granting the poet a new potency. This participatory element of the poetic imagination is key to thinking about the positioning of the poet and the poem as both foreign and familiar in the analysis of poetic paragesis that follows. As we saw in the previous chapter, de Certeau's work on the *writing* of history means that the need for a final authorized 'historical realism' is tempered by an acknowledgement that 'facts' are imagined, 'made', written and told as narrative. They have much more subtle social uses than simply attempting to represent what might have been.

In many ways, there is a dynamic movement between the two imaginations presented here, the historical and poetical, which are *not* thoroughly opposed theoretically but inhere one within the other, or, better, are situated along a continuum of imaginative 'invention'. If we recast both the Romantic poet and the historical critic as *bricoleurs*, albeit of differing types, we can acknowledge that the creative imagination works extant knowledge into new creations of meaning. No one writer has full access to the 'general writing' or arche-writing that conditions the operation of language and reference but must narrow multivalent meanings into consignation; hence the 'anguish of writing' that haunts both the poet and the critic. What separates them are the linguistic and conceptual tools deployed to discipline writing.

One important yet multivalent concept through which these movements can be channelled is the idea of the 'original'. Hulster's outline of the historical-critical use of the imagination is allied with the textual criticism of traditional biblical criticism; here, the critic's imagination accompanies the search for the autograph of the 'original', even if the sensitive critic places this term in 'scare quotes'. As Eldon Jay Epp has explored, particularly for New Testament textual critics,

those [scare quotes] protect against full disclosure, for while conveying little by way of specifics they appear to provide a generalized caution against expecting overly precise or fully confident conclusions, and

72 Ibid., p. 14.

thereby for most textual critics they signal a measure of humility in the face of the awesome task of accommodating and analyzing the thousands of manuscripts and the few hundred thousand variant readings that transmit a very small body of ancient writings.⁷³

Analysing the use of the term 'original', particularly in textbooks and handbooks on biblical criticism, Epp presumes that, for such authors, ideally this 'original' is to be identified with the autograph, the authoritative flourish that identifies and consigns a given text within a given authorial period or even with an author himself. However, Epp also notes that 'original' quickly becomes an extremely multivalent term; at what point is the process of revising, rewriting and reception arrested and an 'original' decided upon? Which is more 'original', "the texts altered by the scribes now much obscured, or the scribes' altered texts?"⁷⁴ There is always an earlier beginning behind the beginning. Epp points out that this quest for the original is not necessarily chronological; the 'original' is also an ideologically and theologically loaded term:

In addition, various other 'original' texts may have been defined by and during the lengthy canonization process, perhaps, for example, at the point when the gospels or the Pauline letters were formed into collections. Finally, additional 'original' texts were created as theologically motivated scribes altered the texts that were their 'originals' by making the latter say what they knew them to mean. . . . [. . .] the original 'original' is now replaced by a new, successor 'original' that circulates in the church and thereby often obscures the earlier, now dethroned original.⁷⁵

Although some of these comments, especially in the focus on the theological motivations behind Christian canonizing processes, are particular to New Testament criticism, Epp's unpacking of the multivalence of how the term 'original' is deployed illuminates some of the ideas that contribute to the ideal of Bible that circulates both within and outwith academic biblical criticism. The point to make clear is that unhooking the term 'original' from simply being a chronological autograph enables us to examine how it is an often conscious designation that has real effects on how a given text is read and used. If "the 'original text' of the New Testament in its common understanding also has

73 Eldon Jay Epp, "The Multivalence of the Term 'Original Text' in New Testament Textual Criticism," *The Harvard Theological Review* 92, no. 3 (July 1999): p. 247.

74 Ibid., p. 259.

75 Ibid., p. 263.

been viewed as authoritative . . . this point at which canon and text cross paths gives rise to penetrating questions. One example might be, if 'original' is multivalent, can 'canon' escape multivalence?"⁷⁶

We shall be approaching questions of how 'canon' also operates as an ideological constituent in poetic retellings in the next chapter but it is possible to see here how deploying the 'original' helps to serve this canonical function. The historical imagination can leave the actualities of the present and envisage an absent 'original', an *archaeology*, words and images on a narrated past, a "living picture" as Hulster remarks,⁷⁷ ironically perfectly echoing Lowth, Sidney and, further back, Horace, Longinus and Quintilian. In the poetic sense, the 'original' becomes the possibilities of a new 'origin' in language and thought that registers the possibilities of imagining meaning otherwise, even if this is an original reordering of already present fragments, a bricolage of extant *l'écriture*. This is an 'original' inaugurated in the present regime of signification. Poetic retellings are, by their very nature, bound to other precursor texts that they organize differently through a productive imaginative writing. As Kearney notes, "the schematising function of productive imagination involves both *tradition* and *innovation*. And this dual function of imagination as a poetic creation of the new by reference to the old is not just a property of writing but also and equally of reading."⁷⁸

However, in the main, the idea of a productive imagination is still tied to an eighteenth century philosophical romantic idealism around the difficult distinction between appearances and things-in-themselves, between aesthetic judgement and conceptual/rationalist judgement (even as this relationship of distinct faculties becomes complex in its description). The aesthetic, still seemingly loaded with notions of excessive fascination with the sensible or private sentiment rather than the intellectual and the public-political is, in my analysis, to be grounded in the problematics of writing. As we have seen, contemporary theory in the form of poststructuralism and postmodernism continues to labour under the legacy of romanticism. In order that the postmodernist Bible does not simply become a neo-Romantic Bible we might follow Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, knowing very well that "one cannot simply dismiss romanticism (one cannot dismiss a *naïveté*)."⁷⁹ However, this does not

76 Ibid., p. 271.

77 Hulster, "Imagination: A Hermeneutical Tool for the Study of the Hebrew Bible," p. 117.

78 Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining: Modern to Postmodern*, p. 164.

79 Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*, p. 17.

mean that “romanticism is our error. But rather that we have to become aware of the necessity of this repetitive compulsion.”⁸⁰

As Avital Ronell understands the new chastened position of poetry, “while the near disappearance, or withdrawal, of the poetic word gives pause, one does not want to get caught in a dialectical spin that has poetry turn up as the purity of veiled origin, as the hidden matrix of signification on which all theoretical work secretly depends.”⁸¹ Instead, I want to utilize poetic retellings as participative interpretation, paraetical works, exploiting the contemporary critical divide that labels one imaginative production as art and performative artifice and another as critically realist and thus more epistemologically legitimate. This enables me to continue to ask questions of how contemporary types of Bible are created through the types of writing that are exercised upon it.

Strangers at the Historical-Critical Table

As we saw in the debate between Aichele, Miscall, Walsh and van Seters in chapter two, in many ways, postmodern and historical criticisms define themselves by othering one another's paradigms, rather as James Crossley noted in the ways in which critical biblical scholarship ‘others’ precritical and uncritical religious uses of the bible. The dance continues here, as I move into positioning poetic retellings as examples of what I am calling *parageses*. Van Seters levelled the charge that many postmodern critics seem to want to be novelists; I am adding to this by arguing that an attention to the poetic might also be a mark of postmodernism's acceptance of the *made* nature of participatory interpretation, including that which is deemed critical.

In order to extend Gary Phillip's notion of the ‘intergenesis’, I want to argue that the ‘para’ position is more able to contend with the multiple ways in which a poetic retelling or critical writing moves between and within and builds upon different interpretations. The parasite itself is a useful theme to think through this necessary participation in creating meaning from texts. As Aichele, Miscall, and Walsh contend,

postmodernism revels in . . . multiplicity and in modernity's unsettled state. For that reason, many theorists describe postmodernism by using various words with the *para* (‘alongside’) prefix. *Parasite* is one of the more revealing of these words because it nicely expresses postmodern-

80 Ibid.

81 Avital Ronell, “On the Misery of Theory without Poetry: Heidegger's Reading of Hölderlin's ‘Andenken,’” *PMLA* 120, no. 1 Special Topic: On Poetry (January 2005): p. 17.

ism's uneasy location within the modern. Postmodernism is the static (French: *parasite*) inherent in the modernist message, the unwelcome guest who helps herself to the host's food.⁸²

This is a firm move away from the inherent Romanticism that both they and van Seters eschew, preferring to underline that postmodernism is not a chronological advancement on modernism but is located like an unwelcome guest who enacts a visitation on claims for a clear and representative communication. If postmodernism is an unwelcome guest at certain disciplinary tables then poetic parageses are rarely invited. This insider/outsider status, as I outlined above in the overview of poetry's epistemological position, is complex yet fruitful. Avital Ronell argues that during the eighteenth century "philosophy and poetry were nearly inseparable," although, as we have seen this has rarely been a relationship of equals. As she highlights,

[a]t times, the philosopher's strategy seemed transparent—he was keeping an enemy close or, Christianizing, he was beginning to show signs of loving the enemy, offering hospitality to refugees of the concept. Other, equally sadomasochistic explanations could be offered for the behavior of the relation of philosophy and poetry through the years. Nowadays, however, the poetic word has remained largely without shelter, without a recognizable address. It is as if the eviction notice served by Plato were finally enforceable.⁸³

Poetry has become strange, unfamiliar, a kind of conceptual refugee. Sociologist Georg Simmel offers a glimpse into the position of the stranger within a social structure. For Simmel, the stranger's position in a group is "determined, essentially, by the fact that he has not belonged to it from the beginning, that he imports qualities into it, which do not and cannot stem from the group itself."⁸⁴ In tracing some of the different postures and positions of the critical and the poetic between the disciplines, I have argued that depending on how the dance is choreographed at different times, the poet has been both insider and outsider. In Lowth and Herder's work, poetry is situated inside the fold of

82 Aichele, Miscall, and Walsh, "An Elephant in the Room: Historical-Critical and Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible," p. 397.

83 Ronell, "On the Misery of Theory without Poetry: Heidegger's Reading of Hölderlin's 'Andenken,'" p. 17.

84 Georg Simmel, "The Stranger," in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, ed. Kurt H. Wolff (New York: Free Press, 1950), p. 402.

biblical scholarship, best placed to transmit sacred and sublime historical truths. However, another side of the Enlightenment Bible project positioned itself against dangerous ‘enthusiasms’ and ‘passions’ through a scholarly stance built around empirical reason. These stances continue in a contemporary biblical studies forum that struggles to define the critical and professional aspects of its work over against the uncritical, aesthetic, or excessive, all of which might re-introduce the overtly confessional or religious back into the fold.

Following Simmel, the poet might be imagined as that type of strange writer who ‘imports’ different approaches to Bible into the critical. But, of course, for a group to create a critical identity, the stranger-poet is always already an excised element in this group make-up, the Other defining the Same. In this case, a poet who retells biblical material is, by dint of circling the same texts upon which biblical criticism exerts its efforts, a distant member of an extended group. As Simmel writes, “to be a stranger is naturally a very positive relation; it is a specific form of interaction”⁸⁵ and the stranger’s “position as a full-fledged member involves both being outside it and confronting it.”⁸⁶ The stranger exhibits qualities of proximity and distance, indifference and involvement, something I would argue also characterizes the difficulties of interdisciplinary work.

As we have seen in Steven Shapin’s work however, the stranger is a problem to a group that for all its emphasis on direct experience and autonomous reason produces knowledge through trust and testimony:

The problem for social order created by untruthfulness was not lying in itself but the *unpredictable* reliability of the liar’s relations. As Montaigne recognised, ‘If falsehood, like truth, had only one face, we would be in better shape. For we would take as certain the opposite of that the liar said. But the reverse of the truth has a hundred thousand shapes and a limitless field.’ The liar disorientated those who were obliged to cooperate with him or to act upon his relations.⁸⁷

If the Bible can be twisted into any one of ‘a hundred thousand’ shapes, as has been a major fear for those upholding biblical authority down the centuries, then here we can see how a stranger might not be relied upon to cooperate with the learned gentlemanly society. The civil code of being ‘at-home’ rules here because “the working consensus of social life depends upon morally

85 Ibid.

86 Ibid., pp. 402–3.

87 Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth Century England*, p. 11.

textured inference: you do not know, but only infer, that if you invite me into your home, I will not steal your spoons.”⁸⁸ If the stranger is a poet, so much the worse; as I have been outlining in this chapter, the poet has been marked as a liar and a counterfeiter, one who uses language as if to clarify and represent the moral and the good, only to become fascinated by the unreal and the surreal, the metaphorical nature of the not true, the not so and the not yet.

Having explored some of the difficulties in positioning the poet in relation to the discipline of biblical studies, even with its increasingly nuanced understanding of what is implied by an ‘original’ text and Hulster’s carefully delineated usage of a historical imagination, I now want to focus on how the poetic paragesis lives along the intertextual lines of communication between texts and readings, occupying and writing the fertile space of the insider/outsider.

Serres, Derrida and Ricoeur: Metaphorical Inventions for Paragesis

In terms of poetic parageses, the complex position of a retelling in relation to the imagined biblical ‘original’ is what makes them so significant and important to bring into the conversation, not only as part of the reception history of a given text (in this case Gen. 32:22–32) but as writings that offer glimpses into how writers read and constitute Bibles. A poem that retells the Jacob and the ‘angel’ motif exists between the different types of ‘Bible’ we have looked at and, as a certain type of literature, questions how epistemological concerns are organized. Although the majority of the poems and poets that I shall be engaging with are unlikely to be labelled as ‘postmodern’, their work allows me to problematize those communications between Valentine Cunningham’s ‘Big Three’ of author, text, reader and keep the relations on the move by positing the rewriter as an author who offers another text to be read and interpreted in the medial and mediated spaces.

I want to introduce some key themes at this point, extending the ‘para’ element of my neologism and exploring how these phenomena are positioned. The backdrops to these ideas are Derrida’s famous and controversial *il n’y a pas de hors-texte* [‘there is nothing outside the text’ or ‘there is no outside-text’] and de Certeau’s notion of the ‘scriptural economy’. Although these two concepts do not map onto one another without remainder, they inform what follows. Indeed, Derrida specifically unpicks de Certeau’s notion of the ‘mystical postulate’⁸⁹ that lies at the beginning of language through his understanding of an arche-writing. De Certeau posits an originary and affirmative ‘yes’ that

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 14.

⁸⁹ See Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), particularly the chapter entitled ‘The Circumstances of the Mystic

is, at the same time, never able to “become a theme or subject of any possible (hypo)thesis, [such that] the very introduction of this figure can therefore, strictly speaking, never have the epistemic qualities of a so-called ‘postulate.’”⁹⁰ It is a fable at the heart of language, a trace that enables language and is the possibility of every utterance.

For Derrida, this is problematic because this ‘arche-yes’ has to be thought of as quasi-transcendental or quasi-ontological, impure, prescribing its double destiny “which is also a destiny of duplicity.”⁹¹ As soon as ‘yes’ is uttered

its intrinsic double nature is already discernible, or more precisely, it is already confirmed. It is and is not of language, it both merges and does not merge with its utterance in a natural language. For if it is ‘before’ language, it marks the essential exigency, the promise, the engagement to come to language, in a given language.⁹²

Thus, although I shall be using both Derrida and de Certeau’s thinking on writing and ‘scriptural’ culture, it is important to note that there are different inaugural ‘fables’ at work around the place and space of the logos.

For Derrida (writing from within Rousseau’s writings, particularly his *Confessions*), reading

cannot legitimately transgress the text toward something other than it, toward a referent (a reality that is metaphysical, historical, psychobiographical, etc.) or toward a signified outside the text whose content could take place, could have taken place outside of language, that is to say, in the sense that we give here to that word, outside of writing in general.⁹³

Writing, then, occurs within a system of *différance*, signs referring to other signs, only being arrested long enough to signify for a moment before a reader becomes aware (or not) that, behind or alongside (*para*) this moment’s event of signification, other connotations struggle to be heard, to be named. Derrida suggests that

Utterance’ for de Certeau’s argument of the ‘mystic postulate’, the transcendental ‘Yes’ that marks the beginning of language.

90 Hent de Vries, “Anti-Babel: The ‘Mystical Postulate’ in Benjamin, de Certeau and Derrida,” *MLN* 107, no. 3 (April 1992): p. 450.

91 Jacques Derrida, “A Number of Yes (Nombre de oui),” *Qui Parle* 2, no. 2 (Fall 1988): p. 123.

92 Ibid., p. 126.

93 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 158.

beyond and behind what one believes can be circumscribed as Rousseau's text, there has never been anything but writing; there has never been anything but supplements, substitutive significations which could only come forth in a chain of differential references, the 'real' supervening, and being added only while taking on meaning from a trace and from an invocation of the supplement, etc.⁹⁴

This general writing has 'disappeared' presence. There is no leaping across, no passing over, into a simple present content to which the writing refers: "The philosopher, the chronicler, the theoretician in general, and at the limit everyone writing, is . . . taken by surprise [. . .]. In each case, the person writing is inscribed in a determined textual system."⁹⁵ This *sur-prise* is a "*being held within [prise]*";⁹⁶ as in Jacob's struggle in the *surprise* of the nocturnal attack, the interpreter is held and can only wrest a brief victory by her supplemental writing on the dimly visible textual event.

This writing participates and partakes of the 'scriptural economy' at its 'vulgar' level. For de Certeau, this 'scriptural economy' functions as the "multiform and murmuring activity of producing a text and producing society as a text."⁹⁷ He follows Derrida's thinking that there is no 'outside-text' to which a subject might gain access to a final signified; in fact, the supposed space of the blank page "delimits a place of production for the subject."⁹⁸ Writing is thus a series of

articulated operations (gestural or mental)—that is what writing *literally* is—traces on the page, the trajectories that sketch out words, sentences, and finally a system. In other terms, on the blank page, an itinerant, progressive, and regulated practice—a 'walk'—composes the artefact of another 'world' that is not received but rather made. The model of productive reason is written on the nowhere of the paper.⁹⁹

Remembering the homologies of scripture, chronicle, and writing that de Certeau collects under the term *l'écriture*, a scriptural economy is the continuous production of subjects bound within institutions and constitutions that

94 Ibid., p. 159.

95 Ibid., p. 160.

96 Ibid., p. 158.

97 De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 134.

98 Ibid.

99 Ibid., pp. 134–135.

are constructed through writing. Writing produces histories, ideologies, pedagogies, economics and juridical technologies of representation that extend to the book becoming a metaphor for the body.¹⁰⁰ As we shall see in chapter five on the paragetical and scripted nature of male bodies, “what is at stake is the relation between the law and the body—a body is itself defined, delimited, and articulated by what writes it.”¹⁰¹ The Law, within which vulgar writing is collated, archived, and recited,

engraves itself on parchments made from the skin of its subjects. It articulates them in a juridical corpus. It makes a book out of them. These writings carry out two complementary operations: through them, living beings are ‘packed into a text’ (in the sense that products are canned or packed), transformed into signifiers of rules (a sort of ‘intextuation’) and, on the other hand, the reason or *Logos* of a society ‘becomes flesh’ (an incarnation).¹⁰²

With this backdrop in mind, I am proposing that poetic parageses acknowledge that there can only be more writing and that there is no escape from writing. Within the ‘murmuring activity’ of producing commentary on that most murmuring and babbling of texts, the Bible, the signifying lines of communication between writers, texts, and readers hum with activity; *différance* ensures that they shall never fall silent, for signs cannot rest within the writing system. This is where the *pharmakon* of writing takes on a new name: the parasite.

The idea of the parasite obtains most of its purchase from the work of Michel Serres as it travels across literature, science and hermeneutics:

Stations and paths together form a system . . . one might have understood what is carried within the system, naming the carrier Hermes. One might have sought the formation and distribution of the lines, paths, and stations, their borders, edges and forms. *But one must write as well of the interceptions, of the accidents in the flow along the way between stations—of changes and metamorphoses. What passes might be a message but parasites (static) prevent it from being heard, and sometimes, from being sent. . . .* [T]here are escapes and losses, obstacles and opacities. Doors and windows close; Hermes might faint or die among us. An angel passes.”¹⁰³

100 See *ibid.*, p. 140.

101 *Ibid.*, p. 139.

102 *Ibid.*, p. 140.

103 Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence R. Schehr (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1982), p. 11. My emphasis.

The reference to ‘an angel passing’ (*un ange passe*) relates, in French, to a sudden lull in conversation, a silence that disrupts communication. Poetic parageses are also parasitical in this sense, disturbing communications, allowing the ‘deconstructive angel’ to pass, scrambling the line and offering more of the drug of writing. These angels might be historical or anachronistic but they provoke afterlives and otherlives in and between the biblical texts, allowing history and literature to come together in new writing. As we saw in de Certeau’s work in the last chapter “whatever this new understanding of the past holds to be irrelevant—shards created by the selection of materials, remainders left aside by an explication—comes back, despite everything, on the edges of discourse or in its rifts and crannies: ‘resistances’, ‘survivals’, or delays discreetly perturb the pretty order of a line of ‘progress’ or a system of interpretation.”¹⁰⁴

If, following Serres, we can imagine that ‘Bible’ and ‘reader’, embedded in or between disciplinary codes of practice, occupy the positions of stations (that are, of course, non-stationary), then we can also imagine that the paths along which information is carried are delineated by our interpretative models—our methods of interpretation write these lines of communication and what is to be produced within the ‘scriptural system’. A question is raised: if there is nothing outside the textual system, how does a given writer manage their own production of commentary?

In fact, historical critics like Gerhard von Rad are well aware that a text like Genesis had been constructed by other writing and that a ‘final form’ is produced by a redactor managing the sources that provided the material building blocks. As he explains, “once we know about the differences in the sources we can no longer have the whole without knowing the exact nature of its parts.”¹⁰⁵ What is not explored is how the writing of commentary and exegesis continues within the wider system of textual signification; most historical critics have no problem with separating the systematic parts of biblical material into discrete units but it is rarer for such critics to see themselves as initiating a necessary and inescapable ‘crisis’ in communications. Etymologically, ‘crisis’ has its roots in *krinein* (Gk. ‘to separate, decide, judge’). Critical work, then, invokes a crisis within the textual system. As I explored above, a critical question intervenes in poetic discourse: a reading of Homer is interrupted by the philosopher asking about the essence of justice; a reading of Gen. 32 is interrupted by asking why there are redundancies and frictions in the literary system. This crisis then has to be managed through selecting a methodology that offers communicative rules, what can and cannot be written about this writing. Building on the trusted testimony of other scholars, von Rad can affirm that, regarding the

¹⁰⁴ De Certeau, *The Writing of History*, p. 4.

¹⁰⁵ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, (London: SCM Press, 1963), p. 11.

Hexateuch, “many ages, many men, many traditions and theologies have constructed this massive work”¹⁰⁶ without having to acknowledge his own embeddedness within the ongoing construction of writing around and upholding this massif.

In his analysis of Gen. 32:22–32, von Rad notes (with many commentators) that the meaning of this strange episode can never be fully decided upon;

[...] precisely because of its breaks and joints it received its essential spaciousness; precisely the looseness in the inner connection of the statements to one another makes room for many ideas; for the individual proceedings and words in the event, as every expositor senses, are not precisely limited with respect to their meaning and their significance. And every exegete will likewise encounter something somewhere in this narrative which can no longer be interpreted.¹⁰⁷

Von Rad’s critical communication here is that the lines, paths, stations, borders, edges, and forms (following Serres, above) that go to make up this story are broad and open, explaining why there has been so much textual production on this motif. However, the exegetical crises raised here can be assuaged somewhat by ensuring that interpretation proceeds from the narrative position of this scene. Von Rad notes that “its relation to the story of deception is unmistakeable”¹⁰⁸ and, just after having explored how ‘spacious’ this text is in which the exegete may practice her craft, he narrows it down once more. In this respect (and, as we shall see, echoing Herder’s brisk analysis of the ‘plain sense’ of this story), “the abrupt interruption in Jacob’s preparations for the meeting with Esau by the Peniel story is clear enough”¹⁰⁹—this blessing of Jacob (v. 29) operates as rectifying the moral effects of the stolen blessing in Gen. 27 even though “under no circumstances is it permissible in the exposition to rectify Jacob’s moral honor in catharsis. The entire emphasis is on God’s activity, his destructive attack and his justification.”¹¹⁰

Von Rad’s critical system demonstrates the paradox of acknowledging the difficulty of managing ‘scriptural’ meaning (in all the senses in which we are using this word) in this story’s open structure and then calling on a methodological system to conclude that, in fact, what this text means is ‘clear enough’.

106 Ibid., p. 27.

107 Ibid., p. 319.

108 Ibid., p. 320.

109 Ibid.

110 Ibid.

Producing a commentary in this way creates and sustains the legitimate use of writing and signification within the writing system of biblical studies. Von Rad, as professional scholar, is necessarily inscribed into a determined textual system that utilizes writing in certain ways, specifically, within a scriptural economy, to use the credit system of truth; trusted and legitimate textual production.¹¹¹

This analysis is not intended to disparage such work. Indeed, its production enables the mutual production of more work prompted by such differential relations. As Derrida explores, commentary

should no doubt have its place in a critical reading. To recognize and respect all its classical exigencies is not easy and requires all the instruments of traditional criticism. Without this recognition and this respect, critical production would risk developing in any direction at all and authorize itself to say almost anything. But this indispensable guardrail has always only *protected*, it has never *opened*, a reading.¹¹²

Opening a reading, within the essentially closed system of writing, means that these guardrails (made from agreed and agreeable disciplinary writing) also become rails of a different type, perhaps for imagining a textual transport system; “*Metaphora* circulates in the city, it conveys us like its inhabitants, along all sorts of passages, with intersections, red lights, one-way streets, crossroads or crossings, patrolled zones and speed limits.”¹¹³ Opening a reading utilizes the mobile nature of the mobile Bible—now historical, documentary text, now poetic literature, it can be stopped at different points within the system and read in that signifying moment.

I am interested by what disturbs this flow, the noises (and silences) that are already murmuring within this interpretative system and disrupt the carrying of information from station to station, the angels that pass as we are trying to read or to hear the ‘encoded’ messages (or stop us just as we are about to cross the flowing Jabbok). Serres characterizes Hermes as the agent who “transform[s] the flows that pass through the exchanger,”¹¹⁴

111 William James brilliantly noted the ‘credit system’ of truth, that “our thoughts and beliefs ‘pass,’ so long as nothing challenges them, just as bank-notes pass so long as nobody refuses them”. Qtd. Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth Century England*, p. 6.

112 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 158.

113 Derrida, “The *Retrait* of *Metaphor*,” p. 102.

114 Serres, *The Parasite*, p. 42.

easing or controlling the passage of information or electricity. But his interpretative task is not to balance the system, the one-to-one pairs of input and output. As Lewis Hyde asserts in his book-length study on the intercultural idea of Trickster, Hermes being a major incarnation of this spirit, “what tricksters sometimes do is to disturb these pairs and thus disturb the web itself.”¹¹⁵ Jacob himself has been inscribed into the Genesis text as a trickster,¹¹⁶ struggling with Esau from within Rebekah’s womb (Gen. 25:22), clutching his brother’s heel at his birth (v. 39), overturning the social system of the firstborn’s birth-right, being tricked by, then tricking Laban into giving him his daughters and flocks, and then trying to trick the ‘angel’ into giving a name.

Paul Ricoeur notes that it is exactly this type of disturbance that *metaphorical language* also promotes, explaining that “if metaphor always involves a kind of mistake, if it involves taking one thing for another by a sort of calculated error, then metaphor is essentially a discursive phenomenon. To affect just one word, the metaphor has to disturb a whole network by means of an aberrant attribution.”¹¹⁷ Making a (calculated) error is what the Higher Criticism, from Lowth onwards, has tried to avoid. I shall say more on managing the metaphorical nature of language in general, and poetic retelling in particular, as I move into the following chapter on making meaning between authoritative canons, but for now, I want to stay with Serres and Ricoeur to consolidate what I mean by poetic paragesis.

The network is the semiotic system by which words as signifiers relate to one another, signifying through opposition. However, the parasite/noise disturbs the relation between terms and results in an increasing complexity of value or meaning to those terms. This is more than the somewhat static model of ‘intergenesis’. As the structuralist Ricoeur highlights, “metaphor occurs in an order already constituted in terms of genus and species, and in a game whose relation-rules—subordination, co-ordination, proportionality, or equality of relationships—are already given. Second, metaphor consists in a violation of this order and this game.”¹¹⁸ Metaphor is a joker with two paradoxical values; it is constituted from ‘orderly’ forms of linguistic relations that it then

115 Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: How Disruptive Imagination Creates Culture* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2008), p. 74.

116 See Dean Andrew Nicholas, *The Trickster Revisited: Deception as a Motif in the Pentateuch* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009).

117 Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello S.J. (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 23.

118 *Ibid.*, p. 22.

goes on to disturb and disrupt, noisily confusing the possibility of hearing the 'messages' being carried along the lines of communication, whilst also bringing seemingly distant terms together in new ways.

However, this disruption need not be seen as overtly negative. Serres' theorem is that "noise gives rise to a new system, an order more complex than the simple chain. This parasite interrupts at first glance, consolidates when you look again."¹¹⁹ This can also be traced in Ricoeur's understanding of the diachronic development of connotation for particular metaphors. If "metaphor destroys an order only to invent a new one,"¹²⁰ but is then

adopted by a significant part of the linguistic community, it in turn can become a common meaning and add to the polysemy of lexical entities, thus contributing to the history of the language as code or system. But at this final stage, where the meaning-effect we call metaphor has become this shift of meaning that increases polysemy, the metaphor is then no longer living, but a dead metaphor. Only authentic metaphors, that is, living metaphors, are at once meaning and event.¹²¹

In order to continue the productive disturbance of a linguistic system, the metaphor must continue to live and move in order to both disturb and promote the linguistic events which may result in meaning; indeed two of Ricoeur's characteristics for metaphor are that "metaphor is something that happens to the noun"¹²² and that "metaphor is defined in terms of movement."¹²³ Both operate to bring nouns or names out from under the binary structures of semiotics and into the semantic system of discourse and living language. Nouns, then, must be 'excited' by new couplings and utterances; for Serres

the parasite comes in with this open-door policy. Its immediate activity is to seek to appropriate for itself what is temporarily in common; and so it speaks. It does not even have to speak; it resonates. It makes noise, like the gnawing rats. It produces toxins, inflammation, fever. In short, it excites the milieu. It excites it thermically, making noise and producing a

¹¹⁹ Serres, *The Parasite*, p. 14.

¹²⁰ Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language*, p. 24.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

fever. It intervenes in the networks, interrupting messages and parasiting the transmissions.¹²⁴

The ‘open door’ of living language, a language that is in constant use, means that noise can enter in and parasite the relation. This is due to the fact that “every relation between two instances demands a route. What is already there on this ratio either facilitates or impedes the relation.”¹²⁵ Hermes can both facilitate and trick the reader’s ability to comprehend the message; he can excite the route of communication and ensure an encounter with formerly-excluded third terms. As Ricoeur emphasizes, “while it is true in a formal sense that metaphor is a deviation in relation to the ordinary use of words, from the dynamic point of view it proceeds from the encounter between the thing to be named and that foreign entity from which the name is borrowed.”¹²⁶ A poetic retelling, as we shall see, in its enacting of metaphorical language, both borrows from biblical material and renames it, re-constitutes it, so that the story lives on, surviving by recitation. It is both familiar and alien [*allitrios*]. Metaphor changes the possibility of *factum*, that participatory sense of invention as discovery. Because the paragesis is situated between the ligaments and webs that make up interdisciplinary communications, it can offer multidimensional interpretations of the biblical fragment. As Ricoeur suggests, “sometimes a whole poem is needed for the mind to invent or find a meaning; but always the mind makes connection.”¹²⁷

Thus the ideas that cluster around the term parasite are often about positionality, especially the difficulties between deciding the boundaries between inside and outside, between guest and host, between metaphor and reference. They also necessarily trouble linguistic communication and exchange on these borderlines and invert some of the hierarchies that reception history might be prone to, placing the biblical texts and the readers and writers on these texts within a more fluid and synchronic discursive system. In addition, reimagined as poetic paragesis, they provoke the crises within disciplinary systems that have to be managed by methodological regimes. For Hippocrates, as well as having the connotations of decision, separation, judgement, *krisis* could also be the critical turning-point in a disease, the moment poised between a return to health or descent into serious illness. What might such paragetical performances then mean for the health of biblical studies?

124 Serres, *The Parasite*, p. 144.

125 Ibid., p. 150.

126 Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language*, p. 26.

127 Ibid., p. 95.

Parasites as Exegetical, Eisegetical, Intergetical Sites

Having outlined why *para* is an important positional value for poetic retellings in relation to 'Bible', I turn to the second half of my neologism: *para-gesis*. These poetic retellings are interpretative and participate in systems of interpretation. It is important to remember that in the way in which I have been constructing them they are to be understood as paragetical *within biblical studies* and this is part of a particular constitution of their interdisciplinary make-up. If the poets are dismissed by both philosophers and biblical critics, they wait just outside the city for unwary interdisciplinary travellers, hydra-headed and peddling the *pharmakon*. As David Jasper highlights, commenting on Coleridge's marginal notes on his readings of biblical scholar J. G. Eichhorn, "literary readings of the Bible hover between the imaginative and poetic, and the academic. That is why, in spite of the development of the language and science of literary theory, they have never quite been taken seriously by biblical criticism emerging out of the demands of historical critical methods and theology. There is an *uncritical* dimension, which is nonetheless rigorous [...]." ¹²⁸

Offering more text, poetic retellings acknowledge that, as Gary A. Phillips underlines "reading and writing, especially as it concerns the Bible, is always about 'more than' texts; it is ever about reading subjects, cultural positions, ideologies, ethical responsibility, and a 'more than', an 'otherness', that escapes critical assessment."¹²⁹ Reading Luke's gospel as an example, Phillips wants to resist the discursive organisation of the text which places the 'imagined reader' in a position to perform the script laid out before him. He does this by what he calls an intertextual 'intergenesis' which "may in fact encourage a hypertextual reading that can go in any number of directions in order to query the intertext, the literary system, and the historical context of Luke's as well as our writing and reading."¹³⁰ The *paragesis* then insinuates itself as an even more mobile reading position that feeds from many sources and does not bear "the hallmark of modern critical scholarship . . . one of preserving the integrity of the inside and the outside by ensuring that the one does not contaminate the other."¹³¹ It takes intergenesis as "the act of rewriting or inserting texts within some more or less established network [for] [m]eaning does not lie 'inside'

¹²⁸ Jasper, "Literary Readings of the Bible," p. 25.

¹²⁹ Phillips, "What is Written? How are you Reading?" Gospel, Intertextuality and Doing Lukewise: Reading Lk 10:25–42 Otherwise," p. 116.

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 140.

¹³¹ Aichele and Phillips, "Introduction: Exegesis, Eisegesis, Intergesis," p. 14. As we shall see, this is one way of getting inside the archive too, for the archiving process creates an inside/outside dichotomy.

texts but rather in the space ‘between’ texts¹³² but thickens this concept by also alluding to the static, the “noise [that] gives rise to a new system, an order more complex than the simple chain.”¹³³

Paragesis, then, offers an interpretative space between texts, made from within many texts and readings, and living on the lines of communication that bind texts together as intertexts. But it is also paratextual, bringing in all that might be outside the formal lines of communication. It acknowledges interpretation as always shifting, equivocal, noisy (except when an angel passes). Significations are circling; the decisions of paragetical reading pull them into alignment, if only for as long as the event of a singular reading takes place.

This passing angel might also be the ‘deconstructive angel’ of M. H. Abrams famous essay (included in Patai and Corral’s anti-theory *Theory’s Empire: An Anthology of Dissent*).¹³⁴ After an exploration of Derridean deconstruction, Abrams concludes that “Derrida’s chamber of texts is a sealed echo-chamber in which meanings are reduced to a ceaseless echolalia, a vertical and lateral reverberation from sign to sign of ghostly non-presences emanating from no voice, intended by no one, referring to nothing, bombinating in a void,”¹³⁵ the ‘deconstructive angel’ reducing all texts “to one thing and one thing only,”¹³⁶ *l’écriture*. And yet, as we have seen, *l’écriture* is never one thing and one thing only; its different meanings jostle for position, attempting to order and reorder a reading.

Abrams, as wary of ‘going too far’ as any biblical critic, is engaged here in a discussion between Wayne Booth and J. Hillis Miller on plurality and history, and he commends Miller for the *pharmakon* of his rhetoric, even as this back-hand complement also signifies that Miller is a ‘mere’ rhetorician and sophist, writing historical fictions that are far from proper historical work. However, Abrams, citing Miller in his own text, opens the avenue for Miller to enter, just as Barton’s invocation of the ‘literary’ in biblical criticism opened a door for my own extended sense of the ‘literary’ to enter. It is worth quoting Abrams’ citation of Miller at length because it also offers further nuance to my concept of paragesis:

132 Ibid.

133 Serres, *The Parasite*, p. 14.

134 Daphne Patai and Will H. Corral, eds., *Theory’s Empire: An Anthology of Dissent* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

135 M. H. Abrams, “The Deconstructive Angel,” *Critical Inquiry* 3, no. 3 (Spring 1977): p. 431.

136 Ibid., p. 435.

I shall cite a final passage to exemplify the deft and inventive play of Miller's rhetoric, punning, and figuration, which give his formulations of the *mise en abyme* a charm that is hard to resist. In it he imposes his fused analogues of labyrinth and web and abyss on the black-on-blanks which constitute the elemental given of the deconstructive premises:

Far from providing a benign escape from the maze, Ariadne's thread makes the labyrinth, is the labyrinth. The interpretation or solving of the puzzles of the textual web only adds more filaments to the web. One can never escape from the labyrinth because the activity of escaping makes more labyrinth, the thread of a linear narrative or story. Criticism is the production of more thread to embroider the texture or textile already there. This thread is like a filament of ink which flows from the pen of the writer, keeping him in the web but suspending him also over the chasm, the blank page that thin line hides.¹³⁷

Throughout my analysis I have been utilizing the etymological links of *relegere*/*relegere*, this doubling of being bound (ligature) into re-reading biblical texts from a variety of standpoints. Here, Miller suggests that interpretation, as rereading, attempting an escape from the labyrinth of *l'écriture* through the right interpretation, actually adds more to the web, more threads to the texture of text. Even critical forms of writing bind the reader/writer into the web, but this web is also a safety net, a home as well as a hunting space, spun out from their own internal cavities. More writing can suspend disbelief over the abyss. And as an interpretative net, it is also a network of intertexts requiring decentred multivalent parageses.

Such a decentred network is not without politico-ethical reading and writing demands however. As the Bible and Cultural Collective underline, the postmodern "as unruly, nebulous, elusive, and decentring needs to be engaged creatively and critically rather than summarily dismissed or fetishized as the latest intellectual fashion."¹³⁸ And as David Clines writes, nets can be impermeable (aporia) or impenetrable, whilst others allow only certain elements through; does the net consist of holes or interconnectedness? Can it be a model "of the distribution of power?"¹³⁹ These questions shall be directly engaged in

137 J. Hillis Miller, "Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure, II," *The Georgia Review* 30 (Summer 1976): p. 337. Qtd. Abrams, "The Deconstructive Angel," p. 436.

138 The Bible and Culture Collective, *The Postmodern Bible*, p. 9.

139 David J. A. Clines, "The Pyramid and the Net: The Postmodern Adventure in Biblical Studies," in *On the Way to the Postmodern: Old Testament Essays, 1967-1998. Vol I, JSOT Supplement Series* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), p. 141.

chapter five where I look at how critical men's studies offers an awareness of gendered readings and writings on Bible and the Jacob and the Angel scene in particular.

Now that he has been allowed a voice through citation in Abrams' text, Miller's essay 'The Critic as Host' continues this theme of the parasite as always already in operation in literary criticism. He asks what happens when

a critical essay extracts a 'passage' and 'cites' it? Is this different from a citation, echo, or allusion within a poem? Is a citation an alien parasite within the body of its host, the main text, or is it the other way around, the interpretative text the parasite which surrounds and strangles the citation which is its host? The host feeds the parasite and makes its life possible, but at the same time is killed by it, as 'criticism' is often said to kill 'literature.' Or can host and parasite live happily together, in the domicile of the same text, feeding each other or sharing the food?¹⁴⁰

Does a poetic paragesis, which re-cites biblical material, live on the body, the corpus, of biblical literature, strangling it by constricting its 'original' meaning? Or does the biblical only live on in contemporary conditions by parasiting itself, feeding on literary *and* historical-critical retellings and recitings which host it in the present age? Biblical texts also make up part of the webs, the literary material that is available to the writer who is caught within their fibres, even as he spins more text in order to free himself. These spinnings make the web hum with noise, signifying that there is a parasite on the line, a Hermes, a deconstructive angel, who will change and increase the complexity of interpretation through more writing. Miller continues (and I parasite myself on his citation even as I host his work within my own writing):

'Para' is an 'uncanny' double antithetical prefix signifying at once proximity and distance, similarity and difference, interiority and exteriority, something at once inside a domestic economy and outside it, something simultaneously this side of the boundary line, threshold, or margin, and at the same time beyond it, equivalent in status and at the same time secondary or subsidiary, submissive, as of guest to host, slave to master. A thing in 'para' is, moreover, not only simultaneously on both sides of the boundary line between inside and outside. It is also the boundary itself, the screen which is at once a permeable membrane connecting inside and outside, confusing them with one another, allowing the outside in,

140 Miller, "The Critic as Host," p. 439.

making the inside out, dividing them but also forming an ambiguous transition between one and the other. Though any given word in 'para' may seem to choose unequivocally or univocally one of these possibilities, the other meanings are always there as a shimmering or wavering in the word which makes it refuse to stay still in a sentence, like a slightly alien guest within the syntactical closure where all the words are family friends together.¹⁴¹

The poetic paragesis sets up its own boundary line, between the critical and the poetic, the writer allowing and disallowing metaphor and imagery garnered from different disciplines, different archives, to transit differently through the porous poem for the next reader/writer to live with. The Ariadne's thread of the poem is written and spun out from the material that has been parasitically digested from living on a web not of our making, thrumming from voices not our own. To cite Miller one last time in this section, acknowledging the complexities of writers being both host and guest to language *at the same time* is an argument for

the value of recognizing the great complexity and equivocal richness of apparently obvious or univocal language, even the language of criticism, *which is in this respect continuous with the language of literature*. This complexity and equivocal richness . . . resides in part in the fact that there is no conceptual expression without figure, and no intertwining of concept and figure without an implied story, narrative, or myth, in this case the story of the alien guest in the home. *Deconstruction is an investigation of what is implied by this inherence of figure, concept, and narrative in one another*. Deconstruction is therefore a rhetorical discipline.¹⁴²

Miller here demonstrates how literary critics are less fearful than many biblical critics of the ways the language of criticism and the language of literature flourish together. Of course, as we have seen in the 'after-Theory' impetus that may be detected in many literary critics' work, this flourish is seen as the mark of authors, writers in the pre-dissolved sense, who are able to perform various reading modes through a knowing creativity. But deconstruction is *not* destructive; as Miller underlines in the above quotation, it can be an investigation of what it means to write (paragetically), to figure and represent conceptual expression within a given narrative or myth. This does not suggest that

141 Ibid., p. 441.

142 Ibid., p. 443. My emphasis.

conceptualization or figuration is now impossible, that we must now inhabit our own echo-chambers and 'bombinate in a void'. What is required is a certain awareness of response-ability, that one's ability to read and write a response within a 'scriptural economy', is bound into the webs of a culture's narratives, stories, and myths. This ability is critical in the etymological sense—decisions and judgements are made, and have to be, in order to arrest the shimmering deconstructive angel long enough for a reading to occur. As is often forgotten in the debates between postmodernism and historical-criticism, Derrida speaks of traditional criticism as "‘an indispensable guardrail’ that stops ‘criticism from developing in any direction at all and authorize[s] itself to say almost anything’."¹⁴³ If *déconstruire* is to dismantle, to pull down, poetic parageses are akin to how de Certeau describes historiography, "operating right where the *given* must be transformed into a *construct*, of building representations with past materials,"¹⁴⁴ poets operating as *bricoleurs* playing seriously, responsibly, with meaning they themselves have not autonomously created.¹⁴⁵

Conceiving of poetic retellings as one form of the paragetical paradigm has allowed me to do a number of things. The 'para' element signifies that these writings happen in and between the disciplinary movements of biblical studies, literary criticism and Theory that I have been tracing, whilst also foregrounding the *poesis* of a writer's response to a biblical text. These retellings are also parasitical in feeding on interdisciplinary work *and* acknowledging their indebtedness and bonds with the biblical texts that are both host and guest within their poetic figurations. They also participate in and excite interpretative work—exegetical, eisegetical, intergetical—contributing to the increased weaving of the interpretative web, texts that continue to spin their guest/host into a wider 'scriptural' culture. These parageses are also homes of searching (בֵּית הַמִּדְרָשׁ – *bet hamidraš*),¹⁴⁶ safety nets and hunting traps. Positioned inside and outside, they are permeable membranes made of writing. And they write with and on *l'écriture*, scripture, history, chronicle, literature.

To chart every possible combination and movement is impossible for a reading only ever happens once and then is iterated differently thereafter. But these combinations are part of what constitutes the reading of biblical texts. What I have been suggesting in the first two chapters is that the type

¹⁴³ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 158.

¹⁴⁴ De Certeau, *The Writing of History*, p. 6.

¹⁴⁵ See Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination: Toward a Postmodern Culture*, pp. 12–13.

¹⁴⁶ See Christopher Burdon, "Jacob, Esau and the Strife of Meanings," in *Self / Same / Other: Revisioning the Subject in Literature and Theology*, ed. Heather Walton and Andrew W. Hass (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

of 'Bible', of *l'écriture*, is decided upon during the reading act. Then the type of interpretative guide is chosen (exegesis, eisegesis, intergenesis—all paragesis and, again, not primarily or secondarily but during the reading act), and reading or rewriting occurs in a response that simultaneously creates and posits meaning around the text in question. For example, if the Bible is constituted as literature (attempting to silence the other types of biblical authority that jostle for position within *l'écriture*), then the reading and interpretative approaches, the readerly and writerly possibilities, are constituted differently. If the Bible is constituted as a collection of historical documents with a lost origin, then, again, the reading techniques available are constituted differently. Conflict occurs between the disciplinary parties when these constitutions mix and get confused, when managing the ambiguities inherent in making meaning with texts is disorganized, out of alignment, and overflows into epistemologies that each party deems illegitimate in the other.

Centering my construction of the poetic paragesis on Gen. 32:22–32 demonstrates how such undecideability haunts critical and poetic writing. As the accounts of the struggle and encounter with the man/angel/messenger will show it is frequently difficult to decide on an outright winner. As with deconstruction, "the text retains the power to elude and overturn every reading—while the reader retains the power endlessly to rewrite the text."¹⁴⁷ The next chapter opens with an overview of how different readers have attempted to make meaning with such an ambiguous text, particularly around deciding upon the identity of Jacob's assailant and what this might mean. It then takes the multivalent constitution of poetic parageses and puts them into action. Analysing how these poetic retellings enact intra- and inter-canonical rewriting will demonstrate further that a knowing poesis is an important way of understanding how Bible is animated to live on.

147 The Bible and Culture Collective, *The Postmodern Bible*, p. 131.

Enacting Canonicity: Parageses in the Anatomy of Angels

Chapter three travelled across the disciplines in order to begin to construct an idea of how poetic paragesis might be constituted. I outlined the long embattled relationship between poetry and philosophy and extended this into biblical studies, built as it has been on concepts of historical realism and criticism that necessarily eschews poetic writing as part of its epistemological make-up. I argued that this position of poetry as outsider, stranger to the critical centre, is actually a useful paradoxical position from which to operate. The fact that a social group ‘others’ the stranger, the foreigner, says something about the constitution and institution of both; in this way, the foreign does not actually exist ‘outside’ the group, but is figured strange by the way in which the group systematizes their internal textual production, the murmurings of producing society and the social as a text, as de Certeau has it. Thus the poetic *para*-gesis is difficult to pinpoint, to situate.

As a complex fusion of both poetry *and* theory, I extended Avital Ronell and Bruce Smith’s sense that poetry and theory need not be opposed, but that we can reimagine the relationship as transitive; theory not writing *on* poetry but *toward* poetry. The idea of constant movement *toward* one another is important but I also emphasized that, through the parasitical pharmakon of writing, this *toward* can become a *within*, a difficult fusion of guest and host that can only be separated briefly by the de-scission of methodology or criticism. In this chapter, I am going to thicken this analysis of the *within* nature of the poetic paragesis by exploring how poetic parageses live between imaginary canons, the idea of the ‘canonical’ becoming part of generating and enacting poetic retelling. It is not that canons themselves are purely imaginary constructs; the literary canon has been constructed from a scholarly point of view and the biblical canon from a process of religious definition and institution. Plenty of ink (and, over the course of religious history in particular, blood) has been spilled over which books and materials are considered to be institutionally canonical and the interpretations that are made with them.

However, because biblical material lives between both canons and their ideological persuasions, I shall situate the poetic as a literary site where interpretative performances are enacted between the different canons. Building on

the construction of the idea of poetic paragesis in the previous chapter, I want to allow poetic retellings themselves to start functioning as ‘acts of literature’,¹ questioning further how imaginations are necessarily disciplined and bound into certain regimes of signification, but also how the process of retelling allows for more manoeuvres and performance in reading and writing on the biblical.

If one of the major concepts attached to ‘Bible’ is ‘canon’, then I will argue that this concept operates as both limit and permission over the paragetical writer *and* the more traditional biblical critic. However, this ‘double-canon’ is best understood as an ‘act-event’,² part of the inventive institution of both the ‘literary’ and the ‘biblical’. In order to read and write such paragesis, a kind of ‘canonography’ is enacted in creative ways. I shall discuss issues as to how canon and the canonical are conceived and deployed as a way of controlling the semiotic influx of reading Gen. 32:22–32. This section will explore how the Jabbok scene is made (in)hospitable to retelling and reciting through its multiple canonicities, using short poems by Alden Nowlan, Yehuda Amichai, and Jamie Wasserman. This extends my analysis of the types of biblical authority we noted in the first chapter (poetic, historical, moral, and philological/critical) into how these canons of authority enact the paradox of both *limit* and *permission* in poetic retellings.³

Poetic parageses do not exist outside these limits in a rarefied romanticism. I want to argue that it is by testing their bindings between these constitutions that we are able to think through some of the ways in which Bibles are made to signify. In effect, these poems are ‘iterations with différance’, demonstrating ‘iterability as alterity’ as part of the constitution of all writing, including interpretative writing. Iterability is not simply repetition but an understanding that, in order to operate as a sign, words have to be recognized again, in another context. As Derrida writes,

communication must be repeatable—iterable—in the absolute absence of the receiver or of any empirically determinable collectivity of receivers. Such iterability—(*iter*, again, probably comes from *itara*, *other* in

1 See Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York and London: Routledge, 1992).

2 Derek Attridge, “Performing Metaphors: The Singularity of Literary Figuration,” *Paragraph* 28, no. 2 (Jul 2005): p. 19.

3 See Michel de Certeau, “How is Christianity Thinkable Today?,” in *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader*, ed. Graham Ward (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1997).

Sanskrit . . . the logic that ties repetition to alterity) structures the mark of writing itself, no matter what particular type of writing is involved.⁴

The Bible, as a religio-cultural text, is one of the most *iterable* collections that circle in our scriptural economy. It cannot live on without being reiterated, being read again and again (*relegere*) in a variety of contexts. But this comes at a cost; as Derrida notes: "Iterability alters, contaminating parasitically what it identifies and enables to repeat 'itself'; it leaves us no choice but to mean (to say) something that is (already, always, also) other than what we mean (to say), to say something other than what we say *and* would have wanted to say, to understand something other than . . . etc."⁵ With this in mind, the idea of 'canon' enters in order to offer some kind of control over the dangerously polysemous nature of (religious) writing. Poetic parageses 'contaminate' the biblical material in order to iterate it once again, and always only *once*, singularly. But as soon as the canonical material is read again, it can only ever be 'other' than itself. This will be played out in the three paragetical poems below.

The work of George Aichele, John Barton and Philip Davies provides useful frameworks for investigating some of the issues around biblical canons, whilst John Guillory offers ideas on the deployment of the literary canon. This will provide a way in to thinking through the tactics of retelling a bible that is embedded in a double canonicity and how these semiotic processes discipline the creative imagination. We shall also continue to question the 'hostipitality' of paragetical approaches to a Bible that is both host and guest of the literary and is, perhaps, hostile to being retold in certain ways.

Initially however, I shall offer a broad overview of some of the myriad interpretations that have been produced when writing with Gen. 32:22–32. This will help us explore how different authorities have coped with the text's ambiguities and how 'canon' can become a way of consigning the meaning of such ambiguity. Jacob's antagonist is particularly difficult to read, sometimes man, sometimes angel, sometimes YHWH or Christ, the identity of the attacker shifts according to how the text is read. The implications of a man wrestling and seeming to prevail over God raise theological and ideological complexities for many interpreters. The poetic retellings that I use in the analysis that follows are haunted by these complexities, but exploit the undecideability of the

4 Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," in *Limited Inc*, ed. Gerald Graff (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p. 7.

5 ———, "Limited Inc a b c . . ." in *Limited Inc*, ed. Gerald Graff (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p. 62.

wrestling match for paraetical gain. Thus these ten short lines of biblical text are a proving ground for how poetic parageses foreground the act of retelling and rewriting the mobile Bible.

Reading and Retelling Again and Again: Who is Doing What to Whom? And What does it Mean?

This story's interpretative history begins early, within the biblical tradition itself. In Hos. 12:2–6 we read,

- 2 The Lord has an indictment against
 Judah,
 And will punish Jacob according to
 his ways,
 and repay him according to
 his deeds.
 3 In the womb he tried to supplant his
 brother,
 and in his manhood he strove
 with God.
 4 He strove with the angel and
 prevailed,
 he wept and sought his favour;
 he met him at Bethel,
 and there he spoke with him.
 5 The LORD the God of hosts,
 The LORD is his name!
 6 But as for you, return to your God,
 hold fast to love and justice,
 and wait continually for
 your God.

From this beginning, we already see that the process of retelling is not simply a transmission of ur-texts, imagined units of material that travel into other interpretations unscathed and sit solidly in the middle of the writing that surround them. As Steven L. McKenzie highlights, Hosea's use of a Jacob tradition, perhaps within a liturgical context, functions "as part of an indictment against the people. They are indeed Jacob-Israel, identified with their ancestral namesake. The deeds of their forefather which they extol characterize him (as

well as them) as a deceiver.”⁶ Peter R. Ackroyd expresses his reservations about such a reading;

The tradition itself is quite clear. Success is divinely ordained, and must be seen as the mark of divine favour. Is it likely that Hosea in using the tradition is saying: ‘The story which you love is not one of which you should be proud, for it is a story of deceit. You are condemned because you are one with your father Jacob in your falsity’? Is it not more likely that he is saying: ‘The success of your father Jacob was due to divine favour, and to the closeness of relationship which was his with God’?⁷

However, Lyle M. Eslinger’s persuasive analysis underwrites McKenzie’s alternative reading of Hosea’s use of the Jabbok event. Eslinger reads Hosea as a strong example of ‘inner biblical exegesis’, changing the **אִישׁ** (*’iš* - man) of Gen. 32:25 to the **מַלְאָךְ** (*mal’āk* - messenger/angel of God) of verse 4 (5a, *BHS*) in order to produce “a new twist in the Israel etymology . . . to be viewed as a claim to authority by Hosea.”⁸ As he argues, in Hosea’s use of the Jabbok story, Jacob does not dominate and prevail as a folk-hero but is instead prevailed upon (now in reference to *Jacob’s* ‘weeping’ and supplication) by the *mal’āk* of God. For Eslinger, “this formal dispute was Hosea’s way of engaging Israel in a confrontation with Yahweh, just as long before the messenger had struggled with Jacob and prevailed.”⁹ The result is a prophetic demand for Israel to return to and wait upon God. As a significant part of the process of retelling Eslinger also points out that “it was the very authority of the Genesis Israel etymology upon which the success of Hosea’s exegesis depended. Had the etymology of Gen. 32:29 [Israel prevailing over ‘God and men’] not been widely accepted and even more, approved by Hosea’s audience, his brilliant exegetical efforts would have been completely useless.”¹⁰ This prophetic reworking utilizes the authoritative potency of the normative reading and inverts its connotations chiasmatically. Formally the figure of Jacob-Israel was used, according to Hosea, as a symbol of domination; now, in this inner-biblical exegesis, the people of Jacob-Israel are in the position of supplicant once more.

6 Steven L. McKenzie, “The Jacob Tradition in Hosea xii 4–5,” *Vetus Testamentum* 36, no. 3 (July 1986): p. 320.

7 Peter R. Ackroyd, “Hosea and Jacob,” *Vetus Testamentum*, 13, no. 3 (1963): p. 258.

8 Lyle M. Eslinger, “Hosea 12:5a and Genesis 32:29: A Study in Inner Biblical Exegesis,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 18 (1980): p. 94.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., p. 95.

Hosea's Jacob is not merely lifted from the Genesis narratives but is a writing that combines authoritative tradition with an approach that manipulates the former in order to use it differently in a different period. Because of the construction of the final form of biblical canon (as we shall see below), Bible actually 'para-cites' itself, retelling certain narratives from a different angle and recasting the characters, most famously in Chronicles retelling the narratives of Saul, David and Solomon in Samuel and Kings. Of course, the undecidability of the Genesis text is not cleared up by the retelling. It is decided upon in order to make a theological point but, paradoxically, Hosea's refiguration of the agents involved testifies to the necessary difficulty of identifying Jacob's nocturnal assailant and what such a struggle might signify.

Hosea's retelling demonstrates a theological-rhetorical process that echoes down the centuries. We have seen here how the *ʾiš* has become a *mal'āk* that prevails over Jacob so that Hosea can use this to subvert the potential misreading of Jacob's power over the divine. However, due to the difficult and multiple levels of construction in Gen. 32:22–32, the question of who Jacob was wrestling and over whom he was or was not prevailing, is decided upon differently by generations of commentators.

Kevin P. Sullivan sees Hosea's use of *mal'āk* as a late gloss on the אֱלֹהִים (*ʾlōhîm*) (in Hos. 12:3 that offers a different attempt at sidestepping the theological problem of Jacob wrestling with God and prevailing. Where, for Eslinger, the author of Hosea *raises* the stakes from mere 'man' to 'angel/messenger' with a rhetorical flourish to show YHWH's power over Jacob, for Sullivan, the same author *reduces* the implied stakes of wrestling with 'God' to the more lowly 'angel/messenger'.¹¹ This flexibility allows us to bracket any final characterization of who Jacob is wrestling, and, instead, focus on the implications of how and why certain commentators have decided upon certain characterizations. This decision is fundamental to the *poesis* of the story's potential signification.

Moving from Hosea to other commentators on the Jabbok event, Sullivan notes that in *Antiquities* Book 1, Josephus deals directly with Gen. 32:22–32, choosing a number of terms to describe Jacob's opponent. Initially, Jacob encounters a φαντάσματι (phantom) who then gains the faculty of speech and advises Jacob to rejoice in mastering an ἄγγελον θεοῦ (angel of God).¹² Again, the emphasis is on a divine intermediary rather than Jacob besting God Himself. For many commentators, the difficulties arise in trying to hold together the

11 See Kevin P. Sullivan, *Wrestling with Angels: A Study of the Relationship between Angels and Humans in Ancient Jewish Literature and the New Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), p. 48.

12 Ibid., p. 49. Sullivan is using the Loeb edition, Josephus *Antiquities I–IV*, trans. H. Thackeray (1961).

tensions of renaming Jacob as Israel, “a powerful name, which brings with it a change in nature,”¹³ with the identity of his antagonist who is able to enact such a naming. Renaming is a powerful godlike act but how can it be that Jacob wins a new name from the deity?

William T. Miller, in an extensive overview of the way in which this motif has been received, notes that “many Targums take the wrestler to be an angel; some even identify him as Michael or Sariel. Many of the Targums record a dialogue in v. 27 wherein the angel explains that he must leave at dawn in order to join the choir of praising angels in heaven. Jacob’s remark in v. 31, that he had seen God face-to-face, is modified in several Targums to refer to an angel or angels.”¹⁴ And yet, even when the decision is made to imagine Jacob’s opponent as an angel, there are still fascinating variations on this theme. In *Genesis Rabbah* 77.2, the angel comes in the form of a robber chief who encourages Jacob to help him move their combined flocks and cattle across the Jabbok. The angel takes Jacob’s animals across in the blink of an eye, whilst Jacob toils back and forth, herding the chieftain’s flocks. Gradually he becomes suspicious, charges the man with being a sorcerer, and forcibly shoves a clump of wool down his throat. The angel lets him know who he is really dealing with and touches the ground, emitting leaping flames, but “Jacob was not afraid; he said that he was made of fire himself, as it is written in Obadiah 1:18, ‘The house of Jacob shall be a fire.’”¹⁵ Other midrashic explications argue that this stranger is, in fact, Esau’s guardian angel (*Gen. Rab.* 77:3) and that, for the Rabbis, “the primary reason why God sent the angel was clearly to encourage Jacob to stand against Esau; the implication *may be* that Jacob’s fear was so great that, without special encouragement, he might have fled.”¹⁶

Within Patristic writings there is a common typological theme, exemplified by Justin Martyr in the *Dialogue with Trypho*, where he cites the Jabbok incident as one wherein the Christ, in human form, wrestled with Jacob.¹⁷ This has a number of related and sometimes contradictory consequences for such writers. If Jesus is imagined as the angel, then this supports the anti-Jewish rhetoric of writers such as Novatian who “takes the wrestling as a type of the future

13 Ibid., p. 52.

14 William T. Miller, *Mysterious Encounters at Mamre and Jabbok*, Brown Judaic Studies 50 (Chico: Scholars Press, 1984), p. 98.

15 Ibid., p. 102.

16 Ibid., p. 117.

17 Ibid., p. 119. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 58:10.

struggle between Jesus and the Jews"¹⁸ emphasizing the 'spiritual lameness' of the Jews. John Rogerson notes that Augustine imagines a similar scenario:

Early Christian exegesis, as found in Augustine's *City of God*, saw in the angel who wrestled with Jacob a type of Christ. Jacob's victory, which was with the angel's consent, indicated that the Jews would appear to overcome Christ at his passion. Augustine understands the name Israel to mean 'seeing God', and this will be the reward of the saints. The paradox that Jacob emerges from his encounter both blessed and lame points forward to the fact that some Jews will believe in Christ and that others will reject him.¹⁹

For Ambrose, the theological implication here is that, paradoxically, "Christ [as angel] touched [Jacob's] thigh in order to signify that He would be born of Jacob's line and be coequal with God."²⁰ This links with Justin's idea that "Christ confers the name Israel, his own name, upon Jacob when he blesses him at the Jabbok."²¹ Jacob becomes the double-named Israel-Christ in a complex rewriting, begetting the Christ who begets himself.

Perhaps in order to cope with the theological difficulties of imagining a divine adversary, Origen sees two angels in the story—one who wrestles *with* Jacob and one who wrestles *against* him; the good one names him Israel.²² The idea that Jacob is being trained or coached by this angel to be "an expert in wrestling, the kind of wrestling in which the soul wrestles with the ways which oppose her, fighting passions and evils"²³ is found in Philo. Clement takes this further to argue that this angel is actually Jesus training Jacob; Jesus would not reveal his name because he had not yet been born of the flesh.²⁴

The wrestlers twist and turn and it is difficult to make out what is happening which is precisely why this narrative has had such a long and productive history of rewriting. In the Reformation theologies of Calvin and Luther, this theme of struggling and wrestling with God takes on an individual and exis-

18 Ibid., p. 121. See Novatian, *De Trinitate*. 19.6–14

19 Rogerson, "Wrestling with the Angel: A Study in Historical and Literary Interpretation," p. 132.

20 Miller, *Mysterious Encounters at Mamre and Jabbok*, p. 128. See Ambrose, *De Jacob* 2.30–31.

21 Sullivan, *Wrestling with Angels: A Study of the Relationship between Angels and Humans in Ancient Jewish Literature and the New Testament*, p. 53.

22 Origen, "De Principiis 3.2.1–3.2.5," in *Origen: On the first principles. Being Koetschau's text of the De Principiis* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966).

23 Miller, *Mysterious Encounters at Mamre and Jabbok*, p. 122. See *De Somniis* 21.129.

24 Miller *Mysterious Encounters at Mamre and Jabbok*, p. 123. See Clement *Pedagogue* 1.7.57.

tential tone. As Michael Parsons notes “both reformers recognize that it is God himself who attacks Jacob by the brook Jabbok. Both Luther and Calvin emphasize that the ‘man’ of the Genesis narrative is more specifically God in the person of his Son.”²⁵ Trinitarian theology allows the *ʾĕš* to remain a ‘man’, albeit now a divine man. For Calvin, exploring Hosea’s use of the Jacob story in his *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, God,

tries us by temptations, these are so many combats by which he contends with us; for he seeks to find out what is the strength of our faith. Now when we are said to wrestle with God, and the issue of the contest be such, that God leaves the victory to us, we are not then improperly called conquerors, yea, even of God himself. But how? Because God works wonderfully in his saints, so that by his own power he casts down himself; and while he wrestles with us, he supplies us with strength, by which we are enabled to bear the weight and pressure of the contest.²⁶

Calvin creates a deep paradoxical need for an adversary to prove the individual’s faith, affording “an occasion to exhibit, as on a field of battle, an example and proof of our strength and firmness [...]. But this could not be done without an adversary; for what advantage would it be to fight with a shadow?”²⁷ For Calvin’s theological vision, the adversary has to be more than Josephus’s phantom or even an angel; in order to fully prove one’s faith it must be tested against a God, who “not only exhorts us to be strong, but supplies us also with arms, endues us with strength, and also fights himself, in a manner, with us, and is powerful in us, and enables us to overcome our temptations. For this reason, Jacob is said to have power with God, or to have been God’s conqueror.”²⁸

Luther seems fascinated with the dark side of God. For him, this story resonates with the *Akedah*, where Abraham almost slays his son Isaac at the command of God. This indicates “a dark side to the nature of God, an aspect of his character which seems to want to annihilate his own promises, and which can

25 Michael Parsons, *Luther and Calvin on Old Testament Narratives: Reformation Thought and Narrative Text* (Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2004), p. 52.

26 John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets: Volume First: Hosea*, trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids, MI.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1950). <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/m.sion/calvhose.htm>. Accessed 15th May 2009.

27 Ibid. n.p.

28 Ibid. n.p.

be resisted only by clinging the more firmly to these promises.”²⁹ To Luther, Calvin’s theme of becoming God’s conqueror is why this story is dark with ambiguities;

this is a horrible battle when God himself fights and in a hostile fashion opposes His opponent as though on the point of taking away life. He who wishes to stand and conquer in this struggle must certainly be a holy man and a true Christian. Accordingly, this story is obscure because of the magnitude of its subject matter, and because of its obscurity all other interpreters pass it by. It would also be permissible for us to pass it by. But we shall still say what we can.³⁰

Although Luther suggests that this story’s obscurity leads to writers and theologians bypassing their own potential interpretative struggles with it, my analysis demonstrates the opposite. The obscurity and paradoxes involved in this nocturnal wrestling match appeal to the imaginative faculties, especially, for the Reformation mind, with the implied stakes of ‘wresting’ a blessing from an obscured and terrifying God. Luther himself cannot let the text alone and is tempted into some gap-filling of his own; “Moses does not expressly give the exact words which they exchanged in the struggle, and yet it is not likely that they were completely silent. Undoubtedly, the man sounded forth with terrifying voice, saying: ‘You must perish, Jacob; you are in for it!’ To this Jacob would have replied: ‘No! that is not God’s will. I shall not perish!’ ”³¹ Luther’s theological stance ensures that Jacob, renamed Israel, becomes the ‘true Israel’, that is, the Reforming Church; the Father, in the incarnate Son, wrestles with and disciplines His church like a loving, upright and godly father.³²

As we have seen in the early interpretations of this section, the personification of the stranger-wrestler shifts depending on the agency that the interpreter wants to grant both Jacob and the divine. While the author of Hosea

29 Rogerson, “Wrestling with the Angel: A Study in Historical and Literary Interpretation,” pp. 133–134. Luther frames it thus: “For God hides the church and also our salvation under a dark and horrible cover, to which we must become accustomed so that we do not despair or fall into unbelief even in the greatest dangers and adversities which are thrown in our way by Satan, the world, or God Himself.” Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 31–37*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Hilton C. Oswald, vol. 6, *Luther’s Works* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1970), pp. 146–147.

30 Luther, *Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 31–37*, p. 125.

31 Ibid., p. 135.

32 “Jacob is a picture of the true posterity of Israel, that is, of all the saints and of us also who believe in Christ.” Ibid., p. 153.

converts the *ʾiš* of Genesis to *malʾāk* (which may also be a reductive gloss on the implications of *ʾlōhîm* in 12:3) so that Jacob wrestles an angel (that actually prevails over him) rather than the man-God, Calvin and Luther seem to have little difficulty imagining the assailant as God Himself, incarnate as the unrecognized Son, rather than merely a man or an angel. This fits with the theologies which they are trying to construct around the paradoxical relationships between the Christian and a God able to destroy and bless, to discipline and to love, whilst remaining dark and obscure.³³ As the story is retold and appropriated in creative interpretations the questions of identifying the protagonists remains fundamental. Deciding on who or what Jacob is wrestling is often extremely telling in analysing a poet or critic's stance towards the transcendent or material elements that might be read in a biblical story.

As Bible increasingly becomes a space in which religious, political, and cultural authorities are played out, the Jabbok incident takes on different colours and tones. Depending on the type or doctrine of biblical authority one is attempting to reduce or sidestep, the text is explained away rationally as a 'rheumatic dream' or, later, a 'psycho-physical nightmare'³⁴ on the part of Jacob, or a fight with a very human thief trying to steal Jacob's flocks. Chapter one looked at Herder and Lowth in particular as examples of the new wave of *poetic* authority that was being imputed to the biblical text. Herder, through his character Euthyphron, argues specifically against the notion that Gen. 32:22–32 is better read as another of Jacob's dreams:

And lo! there appeared to him a hero, the divine form of a heavenly warrior, and wrestled with Jacob. It appeared and vanished with the obscure shadows of the dawn; in short, read the beautiful night vision itself, which, even in the tone and colouring of the narrative, seems floating amid the dreamy and untroubled shadows of the night.³⁵

33 "To the flesh it cannot seem otherwise than an evil, troublesome, and gloomy will, but when we are weeping, God is smiling in a most kindly manner, and He takes pleasure in those who fear Him and hope in His mercy (cf. Ps. 147:11)." Ibid., pp. 130–131.

34 "In a very remarkable study of the psycho-physical basis of the nightmare (*der Alpentraum*), W. H. Roscher interprets Jacob's experience as a case of incubation, induced by the obstruction of the organs of respiration, producing a vivid dream of a struggle like that of mortals with Pan Ephialtes in antiquity or of women with demons in the witchcraft period." Nathaniel Schmidt, "The Numen of Penueh," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 45, no. 3/4 (1926): p. 263.

35 Herder, *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*, p. 229.

How could the mighty Jacob be renamed Israel, a most auspicious name ('God-fighter'), if he'd merely wrenched his leg in a dream? Euthyphron's interlocutor Alciphron is forced to realize his mistaken belief in the dream explanation through Euthyphron's scoffing; he concludes that Jacob "saw here face to face the Elohim."³⁶ He acknowledges that, in Homer, "gods and men are in continual conflict; and Ossian's Fingal also on one occasion by night contended with a giant spirit. In the East conceptions of the kind must have been common."³⁷ Euthyphron agrees but counters with the statement, "but let us not confound this artless narrative with such fables and monstrous exaggerations, as belong to the later traditions. How tranquil and how correspondent to the shepherd's character is everything in this narrative."³⁸

Gen. 32:22–32 is now being read as an 'artless', simplistic, 'tranquil' and Romantic pastoral, outlining Herder's investment in eighteenth century notions of the 'sympathetic' and 'sublime'. Not for Herder the dark and troubling theological visions of Calvin or Luther. Here, the "finest part of the whole is in its inward sense, by which the patriarch was taught how needless it was for him to stand in fear of Esau, when he had prevailed with Jehovah in prayer, and with the Elohim by the power of his arm."³⁹ As a gentleman-critic, Euthyphron concludes that "the figurative sense is plain from the place, the time, and the connexion of the narrative."⁴⁰ This is no longer an obscure narrative due to 'the magnitude of its subject matter' (as Luther thought) but is easily explained as a 'beautiful night vision'. Although Herder does not want the poetic ambiguities of the story reduced to a 'rheumatic dream', he does follow the line of thinking that emphasizes the 'inward' nature of such a vision; it still exhibits a theological vision but one that is contained and maintained within a heroic, historically and ethnographically distanced narrative. His claim for the figurative plain-sense of this story, then, takes on a disingenuous tone. There is a difficult balance to be cast between the night-vision's 'floating' and 'dreamy' depiction and the poetic sublimities this offers and the consigning of its meaning to a plain-sense, built on Herder's literary criticism. We shall see more of how this balancing act motivates many other rewriters and commentators as both historical critics and poetic rewriters have, on the whole, decided against Herder's 'plain-sense' conclusions and maintained this narrative's difficult and obscure nature to their own creative ends.

36 Ibid., p. 230.

37 Ibid., p. 231.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

Through artistic and poetic retelling, Gen. 32:22–32 exists as part of a cultural canon of material, a subject to inspire art and thought. It has become canonical in a critical sense too, providing a paradigm for the interpretative struggle with a strange and sometimes inhospitable text. With all these multifaceted afterlives and otherlives as a backdrop to this story becomes a particularly provocative site in which to explore how poetic retellings might function as interdisciplinary interpretations and how they trouble the imagined constitutions of the ‘critical’ and the ‘creative’. Part of constructing these constitutions are the ideas operating around *canon* and it is to these that I turn next.

Constructing ‘Imaginary’ Canons

The word ‘canon’ operates at multivalent levels. It could be taken, etymologically, as denoting “a physical ruler (such as a carpenter might use for measuring) and an abstract standard (as we might nowadays say ‘yardstick’). It referred to the rules by which poetry or music could be composed, or geometrical shapes measured. The notion of a perfect work of art as representing the ideal, to be studied and copied, is fundamental to the Greek concept of canon”,⁴¹ enshrining and demonstrating eternal aesthetic rules. As Robert Alter understands it, in the Hellenistic era, “grammarians who assembled lists of required works for their students called any author worthy of inclusion *kanonikos*, ‘one who comes up to the standard.’”⁴² However, it is with this understanding that difficulties arise. For John Guillory, in his extensive study of the ‘cultural capital’ of literary canon formation, it is this pedagogical relationship that is widely misunderstood and yet underlies the canon debates that animated Anglo-American English Literature circles during the 1980s and 1990s. Guillory notes that Quintilian writes

of the classical world’s primary educators, the *grammatici*, that they were concerned to teach ‘the art of speaking correctly’ and ‘the interpretation of the poets,’ the one by means of the other. They developed procedures for the selection of texts that sometimes constituted the sole means

41 John Rogerson and Philip R. Davies, *The Old Testament World* (London: T & T Clark International, 2005), p. 233.

42 Robert Alter, *Canon and Creativity: Modern Writing and the Authority of Scripture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 1.

of their preservation (for example, the anthological handbooks within which many classical authors survive as exemplary fragments).⁴³

Alter rejects the notion that canon is chiefly “a mechanism of ideological coercion”⁴⁴ but Guillory is at pains to demonstrate how the fact that pedagogy lies at the root of the literary canon means that the question of canonicity or non-canonicity is always a question concerning “the *distribution* of cultural capital, of which canonical works constitute one form.”⁴⁵ Guillory assumes, “following Bourdieu, that the distribution of cultural capital in such an institution as the school reproduces the structure of social relations, a structure of complex and ramifying inequality.”⁴⁶ Alter acknowledges something of this ‘cultural capital’ when he writes that a canon “is above all a transhistorical textual community. Knowledge of the received texts and recourse to them constitute the community, but the texts do not have a single authoritative meaning, however much the established spokesmen for the canon at any given moment may claim that is the case.”⁴⁷ For Guillory, it is this access to and distribution of so-called ‘transhistorical’ constitutional knowledge through ‘received’ texts that once again raises sharp questions as to who constitutes such a community. As he underlines, certain writing’s exclusion from the canon and certain people’s exclusion from accessing ‘canonical’ works

should be defined not as exclusion from representation but from access to the *means of cultural production*. I will define literacy accordingly . . . not simply as the capacity to read but as the *systematic regulation of reading and writing*, a complex social phenomenon corresponding to the following set of questions: Who reads? What do they read? How do they read? In what social and institutional circumstances? Who writes? In what social and institutional contexts? For whom?⁴⁸

43 Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, p. 62. Guillory is quoting from Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, 4 vols., trans. H. E. Butler (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969): 1: 63.

44 Alter, *Canon and Creativity: Modern Writing and the Authority of Scripture*, p. 3.

45 Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, p. 6.

46 Ibid.

47 Alter, *Canon and Creativity: Modern Writing and the Authority of Scripture*, p. 5.

48 Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, p. 18. Emphasis in original.

This brings us back to some of the questions I explored in the previous chapter over how partitions are maintained even within interdisciplinary boundaries in order to regulate epistemological production. Following Guillory's thinking, for a literary canon, it "would be better to say that the canon is an *imaginary* totality of works. No one has access to the canon as a totality."⁴⁹ As he goes on to say, what does have "a concrete location as a list, then, is not the canon but the syllabus, the list of works one reads in a given class, or the curriculum, the list of works one reads in a program of study."⁵⁰ This necessary management of a vast, imagined corpus of unreadable literature through the *list* can also be extended to interpretative management systems themselves. If pedagogy is one of the main forms of disseminating lists of culturally valid texts, there are also concomitant lists of culturally valid ways of reading and interpreting canonical texts. There are thus canons within the (imaginary but not toothless) Canon and canonized ways of interpreting the texts. Methodology and pedagogy go hand-in-hand, especially in a discipline such as biblical studies. Acknowledging this is not simply to dissolve all carefully worked systems of approach to diverse and complex texts (always a fear for those who see post-modernism as some kind of unsolicited free-for-all of interpretative madness) but to continue to become more aware that reading and writing on Bible are complex acts, woven from many differing culturally contingent strands.

Although Alter's notion of the canon as a 'transhistorical textual community' acknowledges that texts are transmitted and live on, the term 'transhistorical' conceals much of the rewriting and revision that also constitutes the maintenance of canonicity. Partly because of this, he is able to write that the Bible "seizes the imagination of the modern writer because of his acute consciousness of it as a body of founding texts, marking out one of the primary possibilities of representing the human condition and the nature of historical experience for all the eras of Western culture that have followed antiquity."⁵¹ It is this statement that Jonathan Sheehan cites in the preface to his analysis of the *Enlightenment Bible* as an example of how "at the same moment that the Bible is mourned (or celebrated) as a victim of secularism, it is also recuperated as an essential element of that transcendental moral, literary, and historical heritage that supposedly holds together Western society."⁵² He notes that, on the face of it, Alter's sentiment seems unremarkable chiming as it does with much that is said of the Bible as a 'cultural monument'. However, for Sheehan,

49 Ibid., p. 30.

50 Ibid.

51 Alter, *Canon and Creativity: Modern Writing and the Authority of Scripture*, pp. 17–18.

52 Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture*, p. ix.

such sweeping statements should strike us as remarkable.⁵³ As we explored in chapter one, the making of Bible's post-theological 'canonical' authority is far from being a transhistorical given and is a broad and complex process. These translations of canonical authority are strong examples of the 'cultural capital' that Guillory uses to understand how 'canons' are enacted and mobilized. As Sheehan outlines, "[c]ulture had no bearing on the Bible [for millennia of Jews and Christians] if for no other reason than this ideal of the Bible and this ideal of culture were invented at a particular time, in a particular place, and for particular reasons."⁵⁴ The Bible's cultural capital then, diffuse and as difficult to define as the term 'cultural' may be, is tied up with its imagined canonicity, its 'monumental' position as a cultural nexus of symbolic exchange.⁵⁵ The ability to access this exchange value (to continue to use economic metaphors) becomes part of defining cultural literacy and the concomitant benefits of being able to utilize and cite certain recognized cultural 'authorities'. As I outlined above, much of the rhetoric around re-presenting the King James Version of the Bible, four hundred years after its first publication, centres on its present cultural value, transmuting religious authority into literary authority; even Richard Dawkins could not countenance the barbarism of KJV illiteracy for the deliciously ironic reason that "it is important that religion should not be allowed to hijack this cultural resource."⁵⁶ However, as I shall argue below, the very fact that religious-cultural canonicity and literary-cultural canonicity are played out *together* and in tension across these texts means it is very difficult to decide which 'canon' is holding sway. There are close genetic resemblances between canons as the "literary canon . . . emerges as the secular equivalent of the biblical canon, a body of texts endowed with unique authority and power, and worthy of the attention of generations of scholarly experts."⁵⁷

53 Ibid., p. x.

54 Ibid.

55 But, of course, this monument might also have been raised over dead texts marked by their irrelevance to the daily lives of many in the supposedly 'secular West'. Although I cannot cover the debates here, the links often made to a 'secularization process' and declining 'biblical literacy' belie a number of complex issues, particularly surrounding how biblical motifs and images carry different currencies, depending on where they are exchanged. For example, their different use-values are apparent in how canonical biblical texts have been used to defend *and* undermine the slave trade, and how theological interpretation is always already tied up with economic, national, and cultural discourses.

56 "Richard Dawkins lends his support to The King James Bible Trust." <http://www.kingjamesbibletrust.org/news/2010/02/19/richard-dawkins-lends-his-support-to-the-king-james-bible-trust>. Accessed 13th February 2011.

57 Carruthers, "Literature," p. 253.

In my focus on the deployment of ‘canonicity’, it is important however not to merely conflate biblical and literary canons as constituted and operating in the same way. The biblical canon is rendered differently between different Christian traditions, with material translated from different textual precursors, and the Hebrew Tanakh is emphatically *not* merely the Christian Old Testament. Behind the disarmingly simplistic sense of ‘*the* biblical canon’, often referring to the final collated form of the biblical books in either Hebrew or Christian Bibles, is a hugely complex process that has been explored at length by many scholars and that might be one of the defining meta-questions of modern biblical scholarship.⁵⁸ Philip Davies highlights how “canon is a Janus-like phenomenon, facing backward through the process of canonizing that brought it into being, but also forward in exerting a ‘canonical’ influence on subsequent study of it.”⁵⁹ This double aspect is part of my analysis but I maintain a focus more on the ways in which ‘canon’ is deployed on subsequent writing around Bible. My approach is to relate elements of the multifaceted canonizing process to how writing practices (transmitting, editing, collating, archiving, accessing and so forth) continue to be enacted in a kind of circular dance where inventive writing both *constructs* different canonical authorities and attempts to play with and undermine them in the same moment.

As an example of the differences in imagining the construction of canon, Davies emphasizes the misconceptions that haunt historical-critical work on the biblical canon, not least that most narratives of the canonizing process fail to recognize that the rabbinic-Masoretic text, the Hebrew Bible in its ‘final form’ as we have it now, “is just one survivor of a number of canons that Judeans and Jews produced, and while it incorporated some of them into itself, it did leave some writings out.”⁶⁰ And, of course, each biblical book has its own history, a kind of ‘survival of the fittest’ that results in its afterlife within different canons.⁶¹

58 Two major collections of essays serve to demonstrate this work: Lee Martin McDonald and James A Sanders, eds., *The Canon Debate* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2002) and J. M. Auwers and H. J. de Jonge, eds., *The Biblical Canons* (Leuven: Peeters, 2003).

59 Philip R. Davies, *Scribes and Schools: The Canonization of the Hebrew Scriptures* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), p. 5.

60 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

61 As Hugh Pyper writes, in a chapter entitled ‘Selfish Texts: The Bible and Survival’, “[s]omething identifiable with the Bible in its present form has existed for nearly two millennia and some of its components for much longer. If ‘survival of the fittest’ has any validity as a slogan, then the Bible seems a fair candidate for the accolade of the fittest of texts.” Hugh S. Pyper, *An Unsuitable Book: The Bible as Scandalous Text* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005), p. 9.

A significant part of Davies' hypothesis as to the 'why' of canonizing echoes Guillory. Davies states that "the idea of canon is an exercise in cultural engineering, an exercise in power and control, an outcome of human decision making [...]." ⁶² This leads Davies to posit the fundamental agent in the Jewish canonizing process—the scribe. He imagines this group (or groups) as an urban elite, distinct from a peasant rural culture but also distinct from the ruling class, existing in a potent middle ground, writing and religion going hand-in-hand:

[R]eligion for the scribe will have been, professionally, an instrument of political ideology and of intellectual reflection, but not the wellspring of political or social behaviour, in which the scribe was guided increasingly by rational and empirical considerations. This culture will have been expressed no doubt partly orally, but also in a literary form, in writings created, copied, and catalogued. For this reason, it is their culture to which we have a better access than any other. ⁶³

While this process does not yet describe the closing of the canon (a different but related part of the canonizing process), the scribal practices of utilizing the power of writing, often "underlining the connection between economic activity and literary culture," ⁶⁴ pre-figure the ideological need to decide upon a final list of canonical texts.

Davies places the authoritative decision to fix the Hebrew canon as occurring some time during the Hasmonean dynasty (c. 140–c. 116 BCE). I offer an extensive quotation here as Davies highlights many points of agreement between how the biblical canon operates and Guillory's analysis of the literary canon:

The early Hasmoneans came to power amid an internal battle over what 'Judaism' was, and, as Josephus reports, they found themselves confronting different groups once they had gained political power. These groups were lobbying for influence over the management of a Jewish kingdom: how would it be governed according to Mosaic law? Who should run the temple and how? What religious duties should the population fulfil? There was also a specific challenge (to which the Hasmoneans personally succumbed in large measure) to allow Hellenistic cultural features

62 Davies, *Scribes and Schools: The Canonization of the Hebrew Scriptures*, p. 6.

63 Ibid., p. 18. One cannot help wondering, from the tone and language used here, whether Davies is not conflating the ancient 'scribe' with the Enlightenment 'scholar'?

64 Ibid., p. 10.

to be absorbed, and among the main features of this culture was education. The educated classes of Judea (and many of the lower classes) could speak Greek, and with the language came the literature. The dominance of Greek could only be resisted if Jewish literature, a Jewish canon of writings, were also taught. We cannot be sure that this was the context in which an existing body of writing was made into a formal corpus of Judaism, but the chronological dates fit and the political and social imperatives exist. Beyond Judea, the canon remained more fluid, but gradually (and helped by the adoption of the scriptures in Greek by Christians), the 'Hebrew Bible', endorsed by the rabbis, prevailed.⁶⁵

Thus we can see that marking out a canon is once more imagined as a way of formulating a wider group identity, a defence against a perceived cultural threat. The formulation of a canonical literature and the pedagogical mechanisms that disseminate this canon are key elements in this defence.

John Barton also emphasizes the ideology of identity politics in Christian canon formation as when, for example, extrinsic constraints, such as perceived heretical movements, force a selective exclusion. He highlights how, in the nineteenth century, Alfred von Harnack's theory that the New Testament canon was formed against Marcion's heretical *Evangelikon* and *Apostolikon* had the effect of confirming the mid-second century as

the decisive moment at which *both* halves of the formula 'neither to add nor to take away' became established, and hence the moment when the canon in the true sense was born. Against Marcion, the Church was impelled to decide that it could not spare certain books from its Scriptures; against the Montanists, that others (such as the Montanists' own prophecies) must not be included on any terms.⁶⁶

Barton also notes that 'Scripture' and 'canon' are to be usefully separated; "there were *scriptures* in Judaism from at least the fifth century BC, but no *canon* until well into the Christian era. 'Scriptures' are books which a community accepts as holy and authoritative—which may be an open-ended class; but a 'canon' is an exclusive list of books which have such a status."⁶⁷

65 Rogerson and Davies, *The Old Testament World*, p. 243.

66 John Barton, *The Spirit and the Letter: Studies in the Biblical Canon* (London: SPCK, 1997), pp. 7–8.

67 Ibid., p. 9.

What Davies draws out with his analysis is that, again, pedagogy becomes a significant area in which these battle lines are drawn and within which a 'canon' is deployed in the cause of religio-cultural literacy. As Guillory explains, the "educational apparatus regulates, because it makes possible, access to this inheritable treasure."⁶⁸ Such access is through the authoritative *list* of included works and the canonical list of Christian scriptures serves as an orientating point against various 'heretical' outsiders. Scribal culture and the machinery of writing lie at the heart of these manoeuvres in a scriptural economy. It is this broad overview of the necessarily ideological construction of canon, however narrow *or* fluid, and the ongoing need to orientate imaginative and scholarly writing around authority that provides a theoretical backdrop to the rest of this chapter. Poetic parageses play out between and within such authoritative canons—in fact, they need to invoke this ideological authority in order to operate.

For the purposes of thickening my analysis of how poetic parageses are articulated, I am focussing on how 'canon' is an imaginary but highly persuasive machinery in contemporary retellings and rewritings. When I use the term 'imaginary' this is not to suggest that canons do not exist; quite clearly, in Judaic and Christian traditions certain *lists* of scriptural texts included in the canons have been chosen and 'closed'. However, the multi-canoncities that surround and embed Bible are part of a continuing invention of cultural canonicity and I am interested as to how such canonicities operate to affect the stance and positioning of the poetic paragesis. For poetic parageses, operating in between canons, exciting and animating the religio-cultural capital of both imaginary canons at once gives them a rhetorical power, an approach that tactically rearranges the materials available, running them along different lines, rewriting and refiguring narratives, figures and concepts.⁶⁹ The paradox has always run deep; if a text is worth canonizing, it has to be made to live on through engagement and rereading. At the same time, it is this process that risks breaking open a given tradition of reception and interpretation—'ruining the sacred truths', as Andrew Marvell feared would be a result of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

The very fact that literary and religious canons are constructed around processes of selection and rejection means that other texts, other ideas, other figurations, trouble the centre. I suggest that the centre does not hold but is

68 Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, p. 56.

69 As I quoted in the last chapter, J. Hillis Miller notes that "Deconstruction is an investigation of what is implied by this inherence of figure, concept, and narrative in one another." The poetic paragesis foregrounds this inherence by performance. Miller, "The Critic as Host," p. 441.

enacted. Just as we saw in Derrida's notion of the 'anxiety of writing,' the canon is also an always anxious concept, a narrowing down amidst a semiotic influx. And yet this can also be cast in a positive light. We need limit in order to make decisions upon meaning. As I shall stress below, de Certeau talks of such limits as also offering permission—the limit of an event means a necessary loss of origins that, nonetheless, permits, makes possible, different origins, new 'originals' that are necessarily engendered in the present by the original loss. Here, admitting that the 'original' in the sense of the initial autographed text is always already lost opens more 'original' readings. The poetic paragesis feeds on the different levels of canonicity that have been alluded to here, using each canon's listed limits as 'permission' for new writing. How, then, do such poetic retellings both animate and illuminate the procedures of the constructed canons? How do they live on and in the transitive tensions between canonical authority and rewriting?

Double Canonicities and Différance in the Canonical Contract

I return to Michel de Certeau's work, particularly *The Practice of Everyday Life*, to suggest that his idea of a 'tactical making-do' in a 'scriptural economy' is a way of negotiating an intertextual space in relation to the cultural imaginary of 'Bible'.⁷⁰ I am not simply setting up 'Bible' as the Big Other that writers and retellers must grapple with in order to wrest meaning for their own subjective space (although this is often a strong theme in retellings). The dominant systems with which writers are tactically engaged are, more often than not, the different canonical interpretations of the biblical texts which lead to conflicting cultural imaginaries about the status of the biblical material. In some secularization narratives, the separation of the 'religious' and the 'secular' marks a significant rupture or rift; yet the return to the biblical texts in a different register demonstrates that there is a complex bind between these supposed dichotomies.⁷¹ As Yvonne Sherwood writes, "in this game, the secular does not trump the biblical, then crumple it up and throw it in the cultural wastebasket,

70 See Graham Ward, "How Literature Resists Secularity," *Literature and Theology* 24, no. 1 (2010). Ward deploys the idea of a 'cultural imaginary' to argue that literature can never, finally, become secular in an imaginary informed by religious motifs and metaphysics.

71 In his introduction to *The Enlightenment Bible*, Sheehan argues "For modern society, secularisation always is and always must be incomplete." See Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture*, p. ix.

but rather the secular plays out its concerns and its disaffections *within the forum of the biblical text*.⁷² To change metaphors, de Certeau imagines that,

[t]he thin film of writing becomes a movement of strata, a play of spaces. A different world (the reader's) slips into the author's place. This mutation makes the text habitable, like a rented apartment. It transforms another person's property into a space borrowed for a moment by a transient. Renters make comparable changes in an apartment they furnish with their acts and memories; as do speakers, in the language into which they insert both the messages of their native tongue and, through their accent, through their own 'turns of phrase', etc., their own history [...].⁷³

Making another life within the many rooms⁷⁴ of the biblical, even if the poet is only renting and will move on to other habitations later, might require that the Bible "no longer has control over the dissemination of its own image, that it is part of the 'semiotic repertoire' of culture—familiar, part of us, available to us, but on our terms."⁷⁵ Following George Aichele's work, and admitting, with him, that much of my own thinking on 'canon' is influenced by the Protestant Christian Bible as that which is most familiar to me, this 'semiotic repertoire' might not be entirely and unambiguously available and open ('on our terms') to textual squatters. As Aichele writes, the biblical canon

is a very powerful force in the present world, and it functions in a primarily negative or reactionary way—that is, the canon *prevents* readers from freely reading the texts of the Bible. Part of the semiotic function of canon is to 'reveal' the included texts to the reader in certain ways, but this revelation occurs because the canon also functions to conceal the texts from the reader—that is, it limits rather severely the possible readings of the texts. This is 'the control of biblical meaning'.⁷⁶

72 Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture*, p. 203. Emphasis in original.

73 De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. xxi.

74 I am reminded that the Italian word *stanza*, which designates discrete blocks of verse within a poem, also means *room* or *stopping place*.

75 Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture*, p. 206.

76 George Aichele, *The Control of Biblical Meaning: Canon as Semiotic Mechanism* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), p. 12.

For Aichele, the semiotic mechanism of the biblical canon “creates order, lines of power, markers of identity. Like all ideologies, the canon does not *reflect* some external, objective reality more or less well, but rather it *creates* reality, or better, it provides a filter or lens through which individuals and communities perceive reality.”⁷⁷ This is how ‘Bible’, as an ideal *canon* of texts, operates to create different readings of Bibles.

In this sense then, the availability of this ‘semiotic repertoire’ is again run across with questions of access and control, questions about how canonical texts are read and written with. Aichele makes important points as to how the biblical canon is deployed, and is in agreement with Davies’ desire to separate the theological force of ‘canon’ from the historical process of canonizing; as Aichele understands it “the canon ‘spiritualizes’ the component texts, emphasizing the unity, univocality, and universality of the message that they transmit.”⁷⁸ However, if this canon creates ‘lines of power’ that organize readings and writings then it is these lines that start to hum with other meanings, providing part of the material for a paragetical rewriting. As much as Aichele believes that canon exerts a control over biblical meaning, he also traces a way of exciting these ‘power-lines’. As he argues, most words are ‘symbols’ in the sense that the “connections between symbols and their extralinguistic objects must be learned in ways that are dependent upon human culture and therefore profoundly ideological . . . signs that are symbols and their meanings can only be learned intertextually, in the play of language.”⁷⁹ Using C. S. Pierce’s work, Aichele breaks the sign into *representamen* (signifier—spoken or written), *object* (denotation), and *interpretant* (connotation—an intertextual link that connects the artificial signifier to its object). The creative paragetical writer does not settle within either the literary or the biblical canon for very long. This would be to rely too much on canonical denotation, tying the linguistic signifier to its canonically controlled object. If poetic parageses live in the intertextual spaces between canons, they feed on the *interpretants*, the connotations that, according to Aichele, are learned and artificial, creating the world of the text and the world of the reader. Through artistic writing, these connections can be reconnected to other linguistic objects. As we shall see below in Alden Nowlan’s poem, the poet takes the *representamen* ‘angel’, letting hundreds of years of reception history imply many of the characterizations that we have traced above and then shifts the *interpretants* so that this ‘angel’ becomes a female antagonist, entering the canonical text from outside the biblical canon.

77 Ibid., p. 18.

78 Ibid., p. 2.

79 Ibid., p. 131.

As much as the idea of canon might prevent readers from 'freely reading the texts', I would argue that there has never been such an event as a 'free reading' of any text, including biblical ones. If, as we have seen with Guillory's and Davies' analyses above, access to canonical texts has always been about the exchange (or not) of cultural and religious capital between classes, races, genders and so on, as different constituents in complex social negotiations, then the 'semiotic mechanism' of canon is, in many ways, simply another example of how reading and writing are not givens but are part of the costing and movement of cultural literacy. Canon is always double-edged. As Barton highlights, a canon "lays on the reader the hermeneutical imperative: Read this . . . as important; read these works as relevant to your own situation . . .; read this work as self-consistent."⁸⁰ For the biblical canon, as we saw in the inventions of the historical-critical Bible and the poetic Bible in chapter one, this hermeneutical imperative is not necessarily lost as traditional authority wanes. It mutates, shifts and bifurcates into different canonicities that lead to different semiotic mechanisms coming into creative conflict with one another. This is where Aichele and Alter are strangely in agreement. Alter believes that canonical biblical texts are read between literary and religious canons leading to "bustling junctions of contradictory aims and values, and not, as many of the new critics of the canon claim, vehicles for the enforcement of ideological conformity."⁸¹ For Aichele, ideology is an intertextual structure where the mechanism of canon "attempts to stabilize the ideological network, to make it permanent"⁸² or, in other words, to denote rather than connote. The reader as poet stands at this junction which is "no more than a knot at which many texts intersect one another"⁸³ and, as we have seen in my characterization of the paragetical writer, contributes to undoing and then tying new knots through the production of more text.

Canons are indeed 'bustling junctions' of contradictions (as most biblical scholars love to point out) but it is often at these busy crossroads that police are called upon to direct the flow of traffic. As de Certeau highlights, being inscribed in working relations as part of a 'scriptural economy' is a contractual agreement, with all the legal implications and responsibilities that this implies.⁸⁴ This acknowledges something of the regimes of signification "that organize a *readable* space (a literacy), and . . . that organize a procedure

80 Barton, *The Spirit and the Letter: Studies in the Biblical Canon*, p. 136, p. 138, p. 140.

81 Alter, *Canon and Creativity: Modern Writing and the Authority of Scripture*, p. 60.

82 Aichele, *The Control of Biblical Meaning: Canon as Semiotic Mechanism*, p. 18.

83 Ibid., p. 19.

84 See de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, especially chapters two and three.

necessary for the *actualization* of the work (a reading).⁸⁵ For de Certeau, this literacy can be controlled as “a private hunting reserve . . . by *socially* authorized professionals and intellectuals (*clerics*).”⁸⁶ Reading otherwise and retelling, then, become acts of resistance, of poaching, tactics carried out in the dark, under the cover of reading, within the semiotic mechanism. Where Aichele and Guillory agree on the ideological semiotic mechanisms of the different forms of canon, biblical and literary, we can see how canonizing is often imagined as a binding *limit*, a legal and imaginative power *over* those whom are contracted, willingly or unwillingly, to keep it.

Nonetheless, Alter, although not known for being particularly inclined to literary theory,⁸⁷ opens up a paradox in which the articulations of *différance* as catalyst for paragesis might be explored by arguing that the Bible exhibits a ‘double-canoncity’. This immediately suggests that ‘canonicity’ itself is constituted by its own alterity, its own undecidable dynamic between biblical and secular canons. For the rewriter, the power of a text that has been circumscribed within a religious canon of scripture, whilst also becoming part of what has been termed the Western literary ‘canon’, offers a tension between different powers or dynamics of author-ity. These powers are not simply in opposition but sustain and deconstruct one another. As Derrida writes,

Différance [sic] is what makes the movement of signification possible only if each element that is said to be ‘present’, appearing on the stage of presence, is related to something other than itself but retains the mark of a past element and already lets itself be hollowed out by the mark of its relation to a future element.⁸⁸

In order for the ‘imaginary canon’ to signify, to shape the ‘hunting reserves’ of the text, it must carry within itself its own hollowed space, its possibility of iterability in a different context. Canons are not inherently or essentially canonical but only achieve their authority through historical contingency. According to this view “every text, canonical or otherwise, is better characterized not by a surplus but rather by the absence of meaning, an absence that must be

85 Ibid., pp. 170–171. Emphasis in original.

86 Ibid., p. 171. Emphasis in original.

87 See his introduction, with Frank Kermode, to *The Literary Guide to the Bible* where the editors consciously exclude Marxist, Feminist or what is broadly embraced by the term Ideological criticism from the contents.

88 Jacques Derrida, “Différance” in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), p. 394.

forcibly filled from beyond the text.”⁸⁹ With this in mind, Alter’s notion of a double-canonicity becomes a recognition that canons only survive, paradoxically, because of this hollow centre, this ability to be deployed as a movable, signifying process that is decided upon in different contexts. The rewriter can enter the ‘hollow’ space of Bible through this double-canonicity, playing one authority off against another, or confirm the Bible’s ability to ‘author’ and be authoritative by utilizing both senses together.

If we maintain the *différance* that sustains the signifying power of this ‘double-canon’, the articulation of a tactical response then poaches in these intertextual spaces, ready to play with connotations rather than settle on denotations. De Certeau’s notion of the canonical biblical texts is characterized by the acknowledgement of the limit, the alterity of the past event, that is

extended (verified) in the manner of a disappearance in the *différences* which that event renders possible. Our relation to the origin is in the function of its increasing absence. The beginning is more and more hidden by the multiple creations which reveal its significance.⁹⁰

If we extend this to the *différance* that traces the relationship in the Bible’s double-canonicity, the way in which the ‘original’ is often used by both historical and literary critics as an interpretative limit has been put under erasure. How can the ‘original’, as an absent *archē*, condition knowledge in the present when more and more ‘multiple creations’ found themselves on this necessary absence?

In a paradoxical way, following de Certeau, although built on absence, Bible’s double-canonicity limits in the *present* by marking boundaries between theological and literary signification. As such, the retelling only ‘works’ if it can acknowledge the creative tensions of these limits and then explore their permissive function, essentially, the permissions that these tensions make available to the writer. Certain epistemologies, such as Bible as canonical literature or Bible as doctrinal source, *permit* different ways of thinking and writing. De Certeau uses the examples of the ‘Freud-event’ and the ‘Jesus-event’ as lost origins that allow for the dissemination of a multiplicity of interpretations, ‘permitted’ by this new epistemological model.⁹¹

The ‘original’ is lost in the retellings that surround it and carry it forward, paradoxically ‘permitting’ different appropriations of the lost event. The double-canonicity of the biblical texts authorizes and permits retellings that

89 Aichele, *The Control of Biblical Meaning: Canon as Semiotic Mechanism*, p. 9.

90 De Certeau, “How is Christianity Thinkable Today?,” pp. 146–147.

91 See *ibid.*, p. 143.

are not simply engaged in a semantic free-for-all, writing without limit (what would that even signify? Would it be writing?), but a *déconstruire*, a disassembling of a piece of machinery, a semiotic mechanism, a writing technology, as if for transport into another context. This is the space for tactical poetic retelling, renting its space within the reading event of a biblical text that is limiting and permissive in the same moment *because* of its double-canoncity. This is why I want to argue for de Certeau's sense of borrowing or renting within a 'scriptural economy'. If there is no way to step outside such semiotic mechanisms, how might they be tactically rearranged for different afterlives or otherlives of biblical texts to take place?

We have seen in the previous analysis that a retelling or 'otherlife' often situates itself in the between of the double-canoncity of the biblical. It is caught at the bustling crossroads of these canons. Crossroads traditionally serve a number of functions: a place of commerce including the exchange of cultural capital; burial grounds for suicides; sites for sacrificial rites to take place; and the place of the trickster, that messenger that puts all meaning under contingency, disruption and *différance*.⁹² Like *différance*, it is a place that is no-place.⁹³ This retelling is also an opportunity,⁹⁴ a looseness in the weave of the text, into which an otherlife might be grafted, the poem as an enacted 'assemblage' (or *bricolent* in the sense de Certeau gives the tactic of making-do⁹⁵) which suggests that "the kind of bringing together proposed here [as *différance*] has the structure of an interlacing, a weaving, or a web, which would allow the different threads and different lines of sense or force to separate again, as well as being ready to bind others together."⁹⁶

And yet, just as poets and rewriters might dismantle (*déconstruire*) some of the canonical readings of the Bible, slipping into its once authoritative spaces and furnishing it in their own words, this brief 'at-home' is also always in the

92 See Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: How Disruptive Imagination Creates Culture*, especially chapter five.

93 "Not only is there no realm of *différance*, but *différance* is even the subversion of every realm." Derrida, "Différance", p. 401.

94 The Greek root is *poros* "which is a passageway for ships but also any passageway, including one through the skin, that is, a pore. *Poroi* are all the passages that allow fluids to flow in and out of the body. A pore, a portal, a doorway, a nick in time, a gap in the screen, a looseness in the weave—these are all opportunities in the ancient sense." Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: How Disruptive Imagination Creates Culture*, p. 46.

95 This assumes that "users make (*bricolent*) innumerable and infinitesimal transformations of and within the cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own interests and their own rules." De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. xvi.

96 Derrida, "Différance", p. 386. Is this re-ligare as *différance* or/and re-legare as *différance*?

process of deconstruction. The Bible's open and shifting canonicity, once theological, now literary, or, better, a complex constitution of both, invites retelling, a rearranging of the furniture, a new coat of colourful gloss, to remain hospitable to the present. Valentine Cunningham argues that the invitation to gap-filling that many writers see in biblical narratives, whether kerygmatic or postmodern, is in effect, a secularising through aestheticisation, a reduction of alterity by casting these old stories in our own secular image, effectively painting the rented rooms in our own colours.⁹⁷ Graham Ward, on the other hand, suggests that literature resists the secular through the shared cultural imaginary that haunts both religious and atheistic writers, echoing from a theological metaphysical world that continues to influence literary language.⁹⁸ Both of these perspectives keep the high-wires of paragesis tensed between negotiating the decideability of these different ideas.

What Cunningham does demonstrate is that "canons of interpretative method do not stand still—just as the canon of meanings is never closed, at least with classic texts like the Biblical ones. It is part of the paradox of the business, that it is canonical of them not to."⁹⁹ This acknowledgement that the production of more writing, is, in itself, 'canonical', agrees with Aichele's notion that the canon "requires external reinforcements because it fails to explain itself sufficiently. The extra-canonical commentaries supplement the canon's control over its meaning."¹⁰⁰ However, this control can be problematized by playing the Jabbok scene's canonicities off against one another. We have seen how biblical criticism rejects the poetic imagination as epistemologically suspect. But, as Cunningham highlights, the poetic retelling is invited back into the fold through the Bible's literary canonicity. There seems to be room for all.

However, paradoxes remain in the 'empty spaces' of the imagined canons; perhaps they are not so 'empty' after all. Where are the poets renting their spaces? Who or what is hosting them? And what are the hidden costs in renting such a space? Perhaps, rather than renting, the poets sense an invitation into Bible's double-canonicity? But, as Derrida warns, "hospitality is the deconstruction of the at-home [...]."¹⁰¹ Hospitality is demanding and dangerous;

97 See Cunningham, "The Best Stories in the Best Order? Canons, Apocryphas and (Post) Modern Reading."

98 See Ward, "How Literature Resists Secularity."

99 Cunningham, "The Best Stories in the Best Order? Canons, Apocryphas and (Post) Modern Reading," p. 72.

100 Aichele, *The Control of Biblical Meaning: Canon as Semiotic Mechanism*, p. 21.

101 Jacques Derrida, "Hostipitality," in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York and London: Routledge: 2002), p. 364.

as Derrida notes, in the code of hospitality that invites the stranger into the home “is inscribed . . . the very meaning [*valuer*] of stranger, foreign, or foreigner [*étranger*], that is to say what is foreign to the proper, foreign and not proper to, not close to or proximate to. The stranger is a digression that risks corrupting the proximity to self of the proper.”¹⁰² The necessary hermeneutic danger of survival lies with the guest who may, in fact, be an enemy, a *hostis*, who might take more than is given, instilling distrust in gentlemanly systems of truth-telling, corrupting the proper, and opening up a gap in the current economy (*oikos*) of the ‘at-home’. Does the poetic retelling live within the biblical, a parasitic guest that helps the Bible live on but only through mutation and change, whilst also hosting the biblical within in its own words? How might these arrangements between guest and host be constituted? If the paragesis exists on the ‘lines of power’, the interpretants that hum with meaning, which is host (Fr. *hôte*) and which is guest (also *hôte*) in these questions of intertextual hospitality?

The Hostipitality of Double-Canonicities: Alden Nowlan

I invite Alden Nowlan’s poem “The Anatomy of Angels”¹⁰³ into my own text and yet, as soon as I have offered the invitation, hosting it, it will enact a visitation on the processes and procedures of my thought; its meaning potential will exceed my capacity to simply host it within the room available here. And yet, I can do no other if I am to write on and from within other texts.

In this section, I want to highlight how, following Alter’s analysis of the (at least) double-canonicity of biblical material, Nowlan’s poem is both hosted by the Genesis text, in that the poem is more meaningful in relation to the biblical material than without, and that, as guest, it brings with it, within its paragetical body, extra-canonical meanings and allusions. The poem exists on the tense relations between different canons, a literary otherlife that enacts the shift from “scripture to commentary to literature.”¹⁰⁴ How can this be and what does it mean to tactically create hospitable rented room (for a non-canonical poem) through the double canonicities of the Bible?

Nowlan’s poem is an exercise in brevity and signification. These eight short lines are densely packed with allusive potential and it is an event of intertextual reading, filtering many other representamens through its tight mesh.

102 Ibid., p. 402.

103 Alden Nowlan, “The Anatomy of Angels,” in *Under the Ice* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1961).

104 Stahlberg, *Sustaining Fictions: Intertextuality, Midrash, Translation and the Literary Afterlife of the Bible*, p. xi.

Nowlan seems to be playing with different canons, both literary and biblical. As Elizabeth Bieman has observed, there is a seventeenth-century ambience (and pun) with the title and the opening lines of an 'anatomy of angels'. The rise of the natural sciences, particularly through the exploration by dissection of the anatomy of many different animals, particularly, of course, the human body, offered a scientific, objectifying gaze into the structures of 'things'.¹⁰⁵ This process seems to make the "angel that up-ended / Jacob" part of the immanent, mundane order of things that can be explored and analysed using this epistemological system. Bieman also sees in these opening lines an allusion to John Donne's 'Air and Angels' and 'An Anatomy of the World, The First Anniversary'.¹⁰⁶ In 'Air and Angels' Donne opens with the lines:

Twice or thrice had I loved thee,
Before I knew thy face or name;
So in a voice, so in a shapeless flame

Angels affect us oft, and worshipp'd be.¹⁰⁷

But as Nowlan writes, these angels that "inhabit love songs" are "sprites / not seraphim." I read Nowlan's angel as up-ending this tradition, soliciting *différance* "in the sense that *sollicitare* means, in old Latin, to shake all over, to make the whole tremble. What is questioned by the thought of *différance*, therefore, is the determination of being in presence, or in beingness."¹⁰⁸ Although the poem turns to the angel's material 'being' or anatomy with her "sturdy calves, moist hairy armpits, / [and] stout loins", the poem has, as an 'otherlife' of a canonical biblical text, problematized the presence of the biblical, the way in which its authority in the cultural imaginary is constituted. The angel is transsexed, difficult to force into signification (just as in the biblical narrative) but the symbolism of her wearing "a cobra like a girdle" is very suggestive. It invokes that other notorious biblical serpent from Eden, often interpreted as a catalyst for the Fall, but, as Bieman highlights, this female, sturdy and earthy, "wears her symbolically phallic girdle in insouciant comfort—there is no hint at all that

105 For a further exploration on how this trope of dissection affects biblical and literary criticism, see Stephen D. Moore, *God's Gym: Divine Male Bodies of the Bible* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996).

106 Elizabeth Bieman, "Wrestling with Nowlan's Angel," *Canadian Poetry*, no. 2 (1978), www.uwo.ca/english/canadianpoetry/cpjr/vol02/bieman.htm. Accessed 13th May 2010.

107 John Donne, 'Air and Angels' in John Redpath, ed., *The Songs and Sonets of John Donne*, 2nd ed. (London: Methuen, 1987), p. 196. Emphasis in original.

108 Derrida, "Différance", p. 401.

she finds it either fearful or restricting.”¹⁰⁹ This short description, even more loaded because of the metaphorical work it is made to do, opens the poem and, by implication, the biblical, through the retelling’s double-canonicity, to the alterities of other significations. For example, as some feminist scholars have argued, the Genesis texts are set within a cultural milieu in which rival gods and, in particular goddesses, have been written out of the theological backdrop. The snake wound around a tree is a symbol of Ishtar, the great fertility goddess of the Middle East and, as Bieman underlines further, “the uroboric serpent, in emblematics, is always potentially androgynous. But an uroboric cobra, tail enfolded in the concavity of a hooded head, make the most explicit suggestion possible of the way this angel takes of befriending her god—surely a god of fertility.”¹¹⁰ As David Rutledge observes, “at once phallic totem and Goddess-representative, symbolising male and female fertility, the serpent encapsulates the movement of deferral between sexual designations, a body at once divided and multiplied.”¹¹¹ That which is suppressed and excluded (othered) in the canonical texts through the monotheism of a ‘jealous god’ re-enters under the guise, the traces, of a retelling. This angel does not seem to be from YHWH or a manifestation of YHWH; she has come from ‘outside’ the biblical canon’s permissions, although it might be better to say that this angel haunts the terms of the ‘literality’ or readable space of the canonical texts, for there is no-place outside. She was there all along, haunting the ‘at-home’. And so, Nowlan’s poem might be seen as a rented (writing) space somewhere within the seemingly hospitable spaces of a doubled Bible. Nowlan provides a space for this otherlife, this *différance* that has to be excluded for the biblical telling to make its presence.

And yet, a girdle is also a binding, a symbol of fidelity to Christ for Franciscan monks and a symbol of military service for Roman soldiers. As Derrida uses the difficult term *invagination*, this girdling that explains the folding, the turning back to centre as edges and margins are folded into a central position,¹¹² we return to the binds, the re-ligares, that keep this poetic retelling tensed between webs of biblical double-canonicity. I have to admit to misreading de

109 Bieman, “Wrestling with Nowlan’s Angel.”

110 Ibid.

111 David Rutledge, *Reading Marginally: Feminism, Deconstruction and the Bible* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), p. 212.

112 “No piece, no metonymy, no integral corpus. And thus no fetishism. Everything said here about double invagination can be brought to bear—a labor of translation—on what is worked out in Glas, for example, on the subject of fetishism, as the argument of the gaine [‘sheath’, ‘girdle’; cognate of ‘vagina’] (to be translated ‘vagina’? On the gaine, see Glas p. 257) [...].” Jacques Derrida, “Living On / Border Lines,” in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1979), p. 138.

Certeau tactically on precisely this point. He argues that readers are not writers because writers found their own places and spaces against the ravages of time; readers are travellers, nomads “poaching their way across fields they did not write, despoiling the wealth of Egypt to enjoy it themselves.”¹¹³ But, I fold his words back in again and find that he also writes that “the place of a tactic belongs to the other. A tactic insinuates itself into the other’s place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance.”¹¹⁴ I would argue that a tactical retelling is a writing that marks the language within which it is operating, not taking over in its entirety but animating alternative use-values and meanings, just as metaphor enters a system and troubles its meaning potential. In the poem, Jacob is left “marking the bed they’d shared, with a great stone.” He has met alterity, a different way of telling the story, and been wrestled into intimacy and dis-location in the same event. The story cannot mean the same again.

The poem itself, as an example of poetic paragesis, does not offer a direct critical interpretation of Gen. 32:22–32. What it does do is demonstrate that this form of literature is an interpretative performance constructed from the same biblical material but allowing many other elements of a participative imagination to intrude. Perhaps this is not, on the face of it, the clear ‘hermeneutic improvement’ that Coleridge tried to achieve through his thinking on the esemplastic imagination. But as an important example of a reading and writing event in the cultural history of this biblical story, Nowlan’s poem provokes all of the main questions we have covered thus far: what type of Bible is being used here? How do different forms of ‘vulgar’ writing attempt to discipline the meaning that is made with such canonical ‘scriptural’ texts? What further interpretative data does a lyric retelling offer us as (post)modern readers?

Pronouncing Shibboleth through Poetic Paragesis

Nowlan’s angel has upended Jacob and then shared the intimacy of a bed, visiting and being invited, enacting proximity and otherness in the same moment. In drawing close to the Bible and in drawing the biblical into itself, the paragesis “becomes hospitable to its other, to an other than itself that is no longer *its* other.”¹¹⁵ And yet, in the moment of retelling, which is also an encounter between texts that is circumscribed and always in context (here within the doubling context of the double-canonicity of a single biblical text), there is a

¹¹³ De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 174.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xix.

¹¹⁵ Derrida, “Hostipitality”, p. 362.

drawing apart. In both stories, the angel as unnamed stranger avoids the consigning power of the proper name ('Why is it that you ask my name?' Gen. 32:29), even though the stranger and Jacob spend time locked in hermeneutic intimacy. Let me go further then and suggest that, if poem and biblical text are both host and guest to one another, *at the same time*, then they are both caught in sustaining *and* dismantling one another in hostipitality. We are moving from the metaphor of renting a room to invoking the concept of a paragetical writing which lives "not only simultaneously on both sides of the boundary line between inside and outside. *It is also the boundary itself*, the screen which is at once a permeable membrane connecting inside and outside, confusing them with one another, allowing the outside in, making the inside out, dividing them but also forming an ambiguous transition between one and the other."¹¹⁶

This ambiguous transition centres on how the canonical is deployed. As I argued above, a poetic paragesis needs to invoke ideas of limit and permission in order to enact its creative potential. If canonical limits lead to creative permissions for the poet then the paragesis can bring the two into being simultaneously, the poem marking out this boundary for itself. However, although canons might be 'bustling crossroads' on Alter's terms, an important factor in the canonizing process is the archiving of *l'écriture*, halting its surplus or irresponsible use. As we saw in chapter two and in the debate around canonical access above, the control over the archive is paramount. As Derrida argues, it is the house of the *archon* in which official documents are filed and listed and it is these officials that are "accorded the hermeneutic right and competence. They have the power to interpret the archives."¹¹⁷ Where the Genesis text depicts Jacob sending 'everything that he had' (Gen. 32:23) across the Jabbok, his home (*oikos*) on the move across fluid boundaries, the archons set up a static home of hermeneutic law and power. They host the biblical only to file it, to list it. How might Nowlan's poem visit such a space where invitations are hard to come by?

If a poetic retelling can infiltrate the archive to set up home, it must become a type of parasitical, paragetical writing that partakes of that which is held within the archive, a partaking that is also part of the parasitical nature of hostipitality. Derrida often writes from inside other writing; from within Paul Celan's poetry, he writes on the non-word *shibboleth*: "Shibboleth is . . . a word of *partage*: *partage* as difference, line of demarcation, parting of the waters, scission, caesura, border, dissociation; but also of participation, as that which is divided because it is held in common, by virtue of the partaking of the

116 Miller, "The Critic as Host," p. 441. My emphasis.

117 Derrida and Prenowitz, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," pp. 9–10.

same.”¹¹⁸ Division and participation happen in the encounter of retelling. Nowlan’s poem both divides itself from the theological/biblical canon, whilst participating, partaking, feeding, from it. It breaks with the anatomy of the biblical and grafts itself, through “the bone / mending,” into a creative paragesis that holds all these lines of power in tension, animating the singular moment of the poem.

As Derrida goes on to explore, the word *shibboleth* can mean river or stream as well as having the value of a password; it is an aporia, a barred passage, the river Jordan in Judges 2, where forty-two thousand Ephraimites fell over the mispronunciation of the word;¹¹⁹ or the haunted Jabbok, where the assailant “may be divine and not divine; he may be a demon and not a demon; while Jacob may be a man or a transformed Titan, a usurper or a heroic challenger who wrests the blessing from God even as he had wrested it, by sleight of hand, from his father.”¹²⁰ At the same time as it inaugurates a boundary it is a word that becomes “what one must know how to mark or recognize if one is to *get on*, if, that is, one is to *get over* a border or the threshold of a poem [or biblical text], if one is to be granted asylum or the legitimate habitation of a language.”¹²¹ Christopher Burdon highlights how “Scripture has been infiltrated into [*sic*] the promiscuous and inclusive world where human subjects inherit or discover or construct or contend for their identities. The communities that interpret or perform Scripture, perhaps even the bulging and prolific canon itself, have become a *bet hamidraš* or ‘home of searching’, where meaning abounds [...]”¹²² To set up a habitable ‘home of searching’ one must know the right words. If, “in a language, and in the poetic writing of a language, there is nothing but *shibboleth*,”¹²³ Nowlan’s poem is a *shibboleth* that pronounces enough of the Genesis story in order to let this deconstructive angel, “adept at wrestling,” befriend the border guards of the archive and obtain passage.

118 Jacques Derrida, “Shibboleth: For Paul Celan,” in *Midrash and Literature*, ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 325.

119 “Then the Gileadites took the ford of the Jordan against the Ephraimites. Whenever one of the fugitives of Ephraim said ‘Let me go over,’ the men of Gilead would say to him, ‘Are you an Ephraimite?’ When he said ‘No,’ they said to him, ‘Then say Shibboleth,’ and he said, ‘Sibboleth,’ for he could not pronounce it right. Then they seized him and killed him at the fords of the Jordan. Forty-two thousand of the Ephraimites fell at that time.” Judges 2:5–7.

120 Geoffrey H. Hartman, “The Struggle for the Text,” in *Midrash and Literature*, ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 10.

121 Derrida, “Shibboleth: For Paul Celan,” p. 322.

122 Burdon, “Jacob, Esau and the Strife of Meanings,” p. 160.

123 Derrida, “Shibboleth: For Paul Celan,” p. 327.

And yet she carries the marks of other readings within and on her body, her corpus, her anatomy. She visits the biblical archive that does not expect her. The trope of Jacob wrestling with an angel is familiar to us from the biblical legend—it is an at-home with us as readers (who make homes of searching in reading). But this seraph makes all angels and messengers¹²⁴ foreign again, unexpected, bearing the character of a visitation. As we have seen, the parasite is both host and guest, and static, noise on the lines of communication, perhaps a messenger that in trying to offer a message complicates, confuses, up-ends even as it contributes to the new. Geoffrey Hartman once feared that if the Bible settled once and for all within the literary canon, this might “mean a material still capable of development turning into a closed corpus, a once-living but now fossilised deposit.”¹²⁵ The parasite within the anatomy of both angels, the poetic and the biblical, ensures that *this* story at least, can never settle; as soon as the material is archived as a fossilised deposit within either canon, the writer is drawn to write again, to try and write ‘home’ again. The poetic paragesis energizes the Bible whilst drawing on it. As Serres notes, analogously, “to avoid the hostility of the host, [the parasite] sometimes copies some of the cells of the surrounding tissue. Thus it minimizes its risks by lightly changing its own body, changing hostility into hospitality, exchanging outside for inside”¹²⁶ and this occurs at the “location of contact points with the host’s body.”¹²⁷ The encounter between Jacob and the angel is situated at the *shibboleth* of the Jabbok, demanding interpretation in a nocturnal contact between bodies that is both wounding and blessing; the encounter between the Bible and the poetic retelling is located at the contact points of literary and theological/biblical canons, stranger/friend, invitation/visitation, hospitality/hostility; in the final analysis, undecideable. Perhaps one must be careful when making a critical de-scission or crossing a *shibboleth*—when each text lives on in the other, deciding and separating might be death.

So Nowlan’s paragesis is an interpretative, but not solely exegetical, reading and a writing. I suggest that this necessary *iterability*, this mark of writing as having to be able to operate without a sender, orphaned and left to drift, always repeated in a different context, opens up different levels of alterity. For a poet to retell a biblical story, *alterity* frames the engagement: the real and imagined otherness of the biblical material, ancient, translated and ‘fraught with background’ in Erich Auerbach’s famous phrase; the otherness of the theological

124 As we saw above, מַלְאָךְ is often translated as ‘angel’ but is more of a ‘king’s messenger’.

125 Hartman, “The Struggle for the Text,” p. 9.

126 Serres, *The Parasite*, p. 195.

127 Ibid., p. 202.

and ideological contexts in which the material has been received and interpreted, perhaps in conflict with the rewriter's own perspectives who, in turn, may position themselves as 'othered' by the implications of such interpretations. And there are the alterities of *différance* that enable poetic language to make its play with puns, allusive and elusive suggestiveness, the traces marking linguistic signs in writing and language itself that enable it to say otherwise, to lie, to be used creatively. Poetic parageses enact repetitions that repeat-with-*différance*¹²⁸ within the scriptural economies of 'writing' in general, and the double-canoncities of Scripture in particular.

Doing without Names: Yehuda Amichai

Nowlan's angel visited a dislocating manoeuvre on the biblical Jacob. Buried by certain canonical interpretations of the identity of Jacob's nocturnal assailant, Nowlan tactically invented a different angel by rearranging literary materials from other extra-biblical sources. His creative retelling played with the connotative ambiguities that haunt this Jabbok scene and animate so much of its reception history. By acknowledging the limits, the lost origins of this story, Nowlan was permitted to 'poach' from other material within the 'scriptural economy' and write a new paragesis bound into the between spaces of the double-canoncity of the biblical-literary afterlives of Jacob and the angel.

I now turn to a poetic paragesis from Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai. This poem raises important questions as to double-canoncity and poetic retelling. Due to the particular and complex historical contingencies of Israeli culture, de Certeau's idea of a 'scriptural economy' becomes much more concentrated. As we have seen, for de Certeau, this scriptural economy functions as the "multiform and murmuring activity of producing a text and producing society as a text."¹²⁹ However, in this case, sacred biblical Hebrew haunts the 'blank page' onto which contemporary vernacular Hebrew might be written in ways that offer themselves to a poet such as Amichai.¹³⁰ As Ruth Kartun-Blum puts it:

128 See Derrida, "Signature Event Context," p. 7.

129 De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 134.

130 As Kartun-Blum highlights, "Twentieth-century Jewish history confronts the Hebrew literary imagination with what seems like an astonishing repetition of the biblical drama. The ingathering of the Jews in the modern state of Israel recalls the biblical exodus from Egypt and, later, the return to Zion of the Babylonian exiles. Israel's War of Independence echoes the conquest of the land by Joshua and the judges. The present-day consolidation of the Jewish State has obvious analogies with the Solomonic Kingdom of Israel.

A new-ancient language, Hebrew is an ongoing palimpsest, both written and spoken, in which subliminal layers show through and are sounded rather than subsumed. This property of the language challenges the modern writer to employ the diachronic dictionary of Hebrew as if it were synchronic, and may therefore be seen as either an empowering property or a handicap. In any case, in this state of affairs, texts are almost doomed to become intertextual.¹³¹

With this in mind, the hyphen between 'double-canonicities' seems to almost collapse. Rather than separate canonical domains, as I have been tracing in the poetic and the historical Bibles, biblical Hebrew is so embedded within modern Hebrew that the distinctions become increasingly difficult to draw. Where Nowlan's poem is constructed between the dual canons of 'scripture' and 'literature', the case of Hebrew retelling highlights the difficulties of deciding on the denotation of *l'écriture*, writing as literature, scripture, chronicle, history. Of course, much has been made of how contemporary English-speaking vernaculars are influenced by the King James Version but, for Israeli poets, activating the connotative facilities of Hebrew has wider ramifications than simply alluding to idioms and expressions from a literary monument. As Kartun-Blum sees it, modern Hebrew has a double-register, meaning that the "so-called colloquial register" is burdened "with various associations and connotations of three thousand years of semantic history."¹³² As she goes on to argue, the Bible

seems to have fixed Hebrew in an obstinate religious mode; semantic presuppositions, idioms and imagery, all containing religious outlooks, force themselves on the secular poet and place obstacles in the way of the evolving vernacular. Paradoxically, however, the very processes of deconstruction and ironization that poets use to secularize their language often serve to revive the original scriptural energy.¹³³

The story of Hagar and Ishmael seems to anticipate the present-day conflict with the Arabs. The revolt of Absalom against David might prefigure the tensions between the founding fathers of Israel and their sons. Moreover, the narrative of the Binding of Isaac has become the metaphor for the most cataclysmic event of the twentieth century, the Holocaust." Ruth Kartun-Blum, *Profane Scriptures: Reflections on the Dialogue with the Bible in Modern Hebrew Poetry* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1999), p. 17.

131 Ibid., p. xi.

132 Ibid., p. 7.

133 Ibid., p. 90.

For Amichai, the simultaneous activation of both the biblical canon and an emerging literary canon allows for a punning, ironic recasting of biblical idioms and reception histories. In one poem, he writes,

I travel in Ezekiel's divine chariot
 And Ezekiel himself dances like Miriam
 In the Valley of Dry Bones.
 Sodom and Gomorrah are booming towns
 And Lot's wife became a pillar of sugar and honey
 And David King of Israel is alive.
 I want so much
 To confuse the Bible.¹³⁴

Amichai's desire to both undermine and shift the connotative functions of the biblical material has led to him being described as deploying a "completely secular biblicism, one that does not teem with the tensions between the mundane and the transcendental as in the poetry of Amir Gilboa, Nathan Zach, or Dalia Rabikovitch."¹³⁵ On the other hand, others disagree with this atheistic/secular colouring of Amichai's work, positioning him instead as standing in the long tradition of Jewish reinterpretation of biblical motifs through Midrash and Talmud, noting that "despite the rebellious attitude toward the Jewish tradition that is so prevalent in his writings, Amichai's poetry can be seen as 'a completely legitimate part of the interpretative tradition of past generations.'"¹³⁶

For my analysis, it is this undecideability that makes Amichai's poetry so important for these questions of enacting double-canoncity. Yoseph Milman characterizes him as "an agnostic rabbi so familiar with religious matters that there is hardly anything of importance in Jewish sacred literature that he does not discuss, either directly or obliquely."¹³⁷ The 'semiotic repertoire' of the biblical and post-biblical writings are Amichai's hunting-reserve—using the

134 Yehuda Amichai, "I want to confuse The Bible," in David Jacobson, *Does David Still Play before You? Israeli Poetry and the Bible* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997).

135 Kartun-Blum, *Profane Scriptures: Reflections on the Dialogue with the Bible in Modern Hebrew Poetry*, p. 49.

136 David C. Jacobson, *Creator, Are You Listening? Israeli Poets on God and Prayer* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007), p. 43. Quoting (and translating) Admiel Kosman, 'Mayim einam yekholim lahazor biteshuvah: he'arah al megillat Amichai,' *Haaretz* 20 October 2000.

137 Yoseph Milman, "Sacrilegious Imagery in Yehuda Amichai's Poetry," *Association for Jewish Studies Review* 20, no. 1 (1995): p. 106.

'religious' or the 'secular' as orientating points¹³⁸ to map out what the poet believes is less interesting than reading how he manages and makes meaning through his poetic paragesis. Indeed, linking back with George Aichele's ideas about how the 'canon' operates as a semiotic mechanism, controlling the lines of connotation that run through any poetic paragesis,

Yuri Lotman has noted that semiotic systems tend to define themselves for the purpose of imposing norms on the complexity of points of view reflected in what he calls the 'semiosphere' of the society. The tendency in Israeli culture to associate present events with the Bible is an important part of the Israeli semiotic system that imposes norms on the complexity of points of view in the culture.¹³⁹

In 'Jacob and the Angel'¹⁴⁰ Amichai plays within this biblical semiosphere in order to construct another iconoclastic retelling of Gen. 32:22–32.

As with Nowlan's poem 'The Anatomy of Angels', Jacob's nocturnal struggle is refigured as an erotic encounter. In the poem itself, the characters are not named but the title 'Jacob and the Angel' provides the suggestive frame for the whole piece. "Just before dawn" the characters find themselves in an embrace. The repetition of being held "that way," especially in the light of the following stanza where "he saw her body, / which remained white in the places / the swimsuit had covered yesterday" suggest that the 'defeat' is a melancholic

138 Here, I am indebted to Ward Blanton's thinking on how the 'religious' and the 'secular' function as 'off-stage voices' that, as always, attempt to manage and consign writing to a particular genre or outlook, narrowing its signifying potential. See Blanton, "Neither Religious nor Secular: On Saving the Critic in Biblical Criticism," in *Secularism and Biblical Studies*, ed. Roland Boer (London: Equinox, 2010).

139 David C. Jacobson, *Does David Still Play Before You? Israeli Poetry and the Bible* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), p. 28. Quoting from Yuri Lotman, *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*, trans. Ann Shukman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 129. David Jacobson notes that "again and again, the Bible is cited to support positions taken on such fundamental issues of Israeli identity as the right of Israel to exist, its relationship to the Jewish Diaspora, the cultural and political values of Israel as a modern nation-state, and the controversy since 1967 over the relationship of Israel to the territories occupied in the Six-Day War. In recent decades, moreover, there has been increasing public debate in Israel between those who take a secular humanistic approach to the Bible and those who insist on reading the Bible in the spirit of traditional religious and/or right-wing nationalist values" (p. 39). Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of the present chapter to explore the productive tensions that these observations engender.

140 Yehuda Amichai, "Jacob and the Angel," in *Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986).

metaphor for sex, that the “hold” which “brings death” has something of the French, *la petit mort*, describing the ‘small death’ of orgasm, but also the seriousness of the struggle within which they find themselves. This struggle, this hold, can bring death. For the biblical Jacob, the struggle with the ‘man’ brings a wounding, a breaking and disruption of his own body, but the result of his defeating the man is a blessing in the form of a new name. Paradoxically, the struggling couple in Amichai’s poem agree “to do without names” as if the naming of each other, or even a renaming, is not a part of any blessing, and might be a knowledge that, in fact, brings ‘death’ closer. However, “in the first light,” this agreement to do without names begins to be eroded just as the ‘breaking of the day’ heralds Jacob’s victory (32:26; KJV).

In both texts, light reveals. The angel-woman’s nakedness and the creation of a sense of vulnerability begins to undermine the cool foundations of the night-time agreement; then when her name is called suddenly “from above,” this new information breaks the contract. Knowing names or consigning names is a powerful act. For the Jacob in Amichai’s poem, knowing and naming are to be separated. During the encounter, they ‘know’ one another through their bodies (here English biblical translations enable ‘knowing’ to offer some access to the punning nature of יָדָע [yad’]). Chana Kronfeld offers a detailed reading of this “iconoclastic love poem”¹⁴¹ that demonstrates that the reference to ‘hold’ and ‘defeat’ connotes, in children’s Hebrew, a kind of childish scuffling, a ‘forcing to the mat’,¹⁴² confirmed in Amichai’s poem by the calling of the ‘angel’s’ name “the way you call a little girl from playing in the yard.” The word *ma’lach*, which we have seen translated as ‘angel’ or ‘King’s messenger’, and which has been of meaningful concern for the reception of this story from Hosea onwards, is here “anchored in colloquial metaphor . . . where it could apply to a woman (in the sense of ‘a wonderful person’) or a child (‘a beautiful, peaceful, and pure creature’).”¹⁴³ As Kronfeld highlights

Amichai introduces into the poem the weighty associations of the biblical story of Jacob’s struggle with the angel, and with all its national and transcendental implications, in order to describe a one-time erotic encounter . . . He domesticates and thoroughly demystifies these materials through the . . . metonymic frame of child’s play. And thus he also

141 Chana Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism: Decentring Literary Dynamics* (Berkeley and Oxford: University of California Press, 1996), p. 110.

142 *Le-natse’ach*—‘getting the upper hand in a scuffle’. See *ibid.*, p. 111.

143 *Ibid.*, p. 112.

effects the sanctification and elevation of both the erotic and the child-like domains.¹⁴⁴

This movement, in the same moment, between demystification and sanctification is especially concentrated in modernist Hebrew poetry and the multivalency of this palimpsestuous¹⁴⁵ language is best exemplified when looking at biblical parageses. Amichai's paragesis, then, is an interpretation of a biblical motif that is not about exegetical gain; the poem situates itself in relation to a mobilized biblical language, a 'sur-viving' or hyper-living text. This is de Certeau's 'scriptural economy' heightened or deepened, stretched, dwelling as one might say "*on top of a volcano*."¹⁴⁶ Even though Amichai's Jacob and angel agree 'to do without names', the poem is haunted by names and The Name (השם [*haa'shem*]). Naming (especially such a name as Jacob-Israel) instigates a history, a theology, a politics, a God. In the context of a 'secular' Hebrew language, naming from an (in)hospitable canonical language heralds a specific danger.

Parageses Pregnant with Catastrophe

In an extraordinary letter to Franz Rosenweig, Gershom Scholem writes on the subject of the Zionist project of 'actualizing' Hebrew as a secular language. For Scholem the "abyss of a sacred language" cannot be simply secularized, "its apocalyptic thorn . . . pulled out."¹⁴⁷ The secularization of language "is only a *façon de parler*, a ready-made phrase. It is absolutely impossible to empty out words filled to bursting, unless one does so at the expense of language itself."¹⁴⁸ Scholem's confession is also a warning;

The abyss was silent and they have delivered the ancient names and seals over to the youth. We sometimes shudder when, out of the thoughtless conversation, a word from the religious sphere terrifies us, just there

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Gerard Genette takes this term from Philippe Lejeune and then paraphrases it thus: "To put it differently . . . one who really loves texts must wish from time to time to love (at least) two together." Gerard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. Channa Newman and Claude Dubonsky (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), p. 399.

¹⁴⁶ Jacques Derrida, "The Eyes of Language: The Abyss and the Volcano," in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), p. 196. Emphasis in original.

¹⁴⁷ Gershom Scholem, "Confession on the Subject of our Language: A letter to Franz Rosenweig, December 26, 1926," in *Acts of Religion*, p. 226.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

where it was perhaps intended to comfort. Hebrew is pregnant with catastrophes [...].¹⁴⁹

When Amichai writes, in another poem, “God lies on His back under the world, / Always busy fixing, something’s always breaking,”¹⁵⁰ Scholem’s fears are realized. David Jacobson notes:

In the use of the word *tiqqun* to indicate the work of this divine garage mechanic, we find a prime example of how Amichai exploits the close relationship between sacred and mundane language in Hebrew. In the context of Hebrew as a sacred language, the Hebrew word *tiqqun* means the restoration of the world to the kingdom of God; in the context of contemporary mundane Hebrew, it is used simply to signify fixing things that are broken, such as a car or plumbing.¹⁵¹

Amichai’s practice of poetic naming dances across the volcano and the abyss. Unable to do without names, without language (for the name will always be called from ‘upstairs/above’, as in the poem), the poet necessarily breaks the seals on the inheritance and releases the revenants, haunting the ‘secular’ canon from the elsewhere already within the language. As Scholem writes, “Language is a Name. In the names, the power of language is enclosed; in them, the abyss is sealed. After invoking the ancient names daily, we can no longer hold off their power. Called awake, they will appear since we have invoked them with great violence.”¹⁵² Derrida, reading from within Scholem’s confession, understands that this haunting is unavoidable, that

[t]here is a specter [sic] because there is language, a language which names, calls, summons [*convoque*], invokes. Language can haunt because names, first of all, haunt our sentences. Names are neither present nor absent in these sentences, neither perceptible nor imperceptible, nor hallucinated either. The category of the spectral *revenant* is not a flower of rhetoric; it *figures*, more or less discreetly, thematically ... that which

149 Ibid., p. 227.

150 Yehuda Amichai, “And For This You Merit Praise: From a Piyyut for the Days of Awe,” in David Jacobson *Creator, Are You Listening? Israeli Poets on God and Prayer*.

151 Jacobson, *Creator, Are You Listening? Israeli Poets on God and Prayer*, p. 58.

152 Scholem, “Confession on the Subject of our Language: A letter to Franz Rosenweig, December 26, 1926,” p. 227.

extracts the entire logic of this confession from oppositional onto-logic or from the dialectic of presence and absence.¹⁵³

Trying to 'do without names' is impossible, as Amichai's Jacob discovers in the morning light when a name is called 'from above' and the game is over. The necessary double-canoncities that I explored in Alden Nowlan's poem have, in Amichai's work, becomes even less oppositional; the hyphen between double-canoncity becomes a collapsing rope bridge over the paradox of a volcanic abyss of language. The only way to maintain canonical and thus epistemological control over the biblical is to name properly, to use the proper critical language. Indeed, opposition to Amichai's work is often based on his "association of 'different spheres' in which the sublime and the vulgar, the holy and the profane, discordantly conjoin."¹⁵⁴ According to his critics, Amichai's poetry is not 'proper' in a morally decent sense but, more tellingly for my theory of poetic paragesis, such writing is not 'proper' in a different way. It troubles the ways in which biblical language lives on. As I explored above a paragesis is caught in a complex relation of hostipitality, moving between guest and host of the biblical; as Derrida notes, the stranger, the guest "is foreign to the proper, foreign and not proper to, not close to or proximate to. The stranger is a digression that risks corrupting the proximity to self of the proper."¹⁵⁵ The 'proper' has to be maintained over and against the stranger, the visitor, the revenant (*host/ghost*).

However, the parasitical poem, living and feeding within a scriptural economy cannot be rooted out "without rooting-out the 'standard' [*le propre*] at the same time."¹⁵⁶ The hydra-headed paragetical poet offers another reading of the Jabbok scene that both undermines and confirms the 'proper' which, as a measured standard, is also a 'canon'. Removing retelling, in any form, destroys the canon. Proper canonical boundaries, whether literary or biblical, are places without place, imagined topologies, undermined and maintained by the *shibboleth*, the naming, within each poem. Derrida suggests that Scholem, writing from the verge of the abyss, "insists and sojourns at this improbable border

153 Derrida, "The Eyes of Language: The Abyss and the Volcano," p. 213. Through this particular 'revelation', Derrida explores the possible impossibility of 'secularization'; that no appeal can be made to a "metalinguistic referee" (p. 200) in order to decide on whether writing is sacred or profane.

154 Milman, "Sacrilegious Imagery in Yehuda Amichai's Poetry," p. 101.

155 Derrida, "Hostipitality," p. 402.

156 Derrida, "Limited Inc a b c . . .," p. 90.

[...]: where no settlement is possible Scholem asks for a *shibboleth* in order to get out of the abyss or, finally, in order to rush into it and be engulfed by it.”¹⁵⁷

The poetic paragesis is the canonical boundary itself, bringing the ‘canonical’ into the ‘act-event’ of reading and writing. I will use Derek Attridge’s work below to underline how this ‘act-event’ might be thought with but I shall offer one more poetic paragesis to exemplify that the abyssal is at the heart of English-language poetry too for,

at the bottom of this bottomlessness, what the blind sorcerers of secularization do not see, is not so much the abyss itself, over which they walk like madmen, but rather that the abyss does not, any more than language, let itself be dominated, tamed, instrumentalized, secularized. The abyss no more than language, for both take place, *their* place, without objectifiable topology, in the name.¹⁵⁸

Groaning, Whispering, and Coughing Up Names in God’s Territory: Jamie Wasserman

Jamie Wasserman’s ‘Wrestling the Angel’¹⁵⁹ characterizes the antagonist *ʾiṣ* or *m’lāk* differently once again. This Other attacks like a “terrible bird”, Jacob only belatedly realizing that this is an angel. In keeping with much of the reception of this scene, the identity of the stranger is conferred retrospectively once Jacob realizes his assailant has the power to *name*. The angel is “calling, / calling”, perhaps a bird-call, a territorial marking, whilst clawing at Jacob’s throat, that bodily opening (a gorge/abyss?) for breathing, swallowing and vocalizing. Jacob does not speak within the poem, does no naming of his own, but becomes aware of this power of naming, in the final lines poking a stick at the “angel’s throat / to make it speak, to see / if he could make the earth crack.”

The sequence of the three nouns/names that this angel groans, whispers and coughs does not lend itself to an easy reading. As a poetic paragesis then, this poem invokes more undecidable naming in the semiosphere of Gen. 32:22–32 and its reception history. Like Nowlan’s poem, it brings more extra-canonical writing into the realms of the canonical (*le propre*).

In the initial struggle comes the audible snap of Jacob’s thighbone; the ‘bird’ halts its attack and screams in sympathy, then groans “columbine”. On

157 Derrida, “The Eyes of Language: The Abyss and the Volcano,” p. 197.

158 Ibid., p. 198.

159 Jamie Wasserman, “Wrestling the Angel,” *Magma* 15 (Autumn 1999).

uttering this word, “a field of red flowers” grows around them. A confusion of connotations troubles the reader. The red flowers suggest Flanders poppies and the rituals of remembrance and mourning for those killed in war. And yet, the columbine blossom is most often a blue flower, from the genus ‘*Aquilegia*’, derived from the Latin *aquila* (eagle), the spurs of the flowers being considered to resemble an eagle’s talons. In addition, the name itself comes from *columba* which means dove or pigeon as the inverted flower also “has some resemblance to five pigeons clustered together.”¹⁶⁰ Thus, this bird-angel’s first word might suggest connotations of eagle-dove or eagle-pigeon, a word complex of hunter-hunted. Like Scholem’s fear of ‘breaking the seals’ over the abyss of language where “a word from the religious sphere terrifies us, just there where it was perhaps intended to comfort,”¹⁶¹ this angel’s word of screaming sympathy terrifies. And, carried along within this eagle-dove-flower name is also the naming of the Columbine High School Massacre of April 20, 1999, when two students, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, killed twelve students and a teacher, injured twenty-four others, then turned their guns on themselves. This latter reading is drawn out by the connotations of mourning and remembrance in the ‘red flowers’ but is by no means certain. In fact, the uncertainty that haunts the uttering of this name is profound and unnerving.

Just as in the Genesis text, perceiving what is happening during this struggle, deciding on who is worsting who, is difficult. Although Jacob has been painfully wounded, by the second stanza, he is reaching “towards the bird / twisted in the dirt, bald and gleaming.” Now the angel-bird whispers “chartreuse”, another name bulging with connotation. As with the blue columbine and the “red flowers”, more colour is introduced, this time a pale apple-green. However, this name also becomes the hinge-point for Jacob’s realization that he is in “God’s territory.” In order for this name to connote, the reader might cross into the literary canon’s territory, drawing a line of reference through William Wordsworth and Matthew Arnold. Traveling through Revolutionary France in 1790 with the “purging fires” of its “new-born Liberty”¹⁶² still burning, Wordsworth visits the Carthusian Monastery located in the Chartreuse Alps. In Book VI of *The Prelude*, he celebrates the passion and freedoms of

160 ‘Columbine’, n.2, Oxford English Dictionary. Online version September 2011. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/36679>. Accessed 6th December 2011.

161 Scholem, “Confession on the Subject of our Language: A letter to Franz Rosenweig, December 26, 1926,” p. 227.

162 William Wordsworth, *The Prelude, or Growth of a Poet’s Mind* (London: Edward Moxon, 1850), p. 153. Lines 442–445.

the Revolution but wants the monastery and its “courts of mystery”¹⁶³ to be spared. Chartreuse represents a “frame of social being, which so long / Had bodied forth the ghostliness of things / In silence visible and perpetual calm.”¹⁶⁴ This is a space in troubled times to look away from the abyss;

To think, to hope, to worship, and to feel,
To struggle, to be lost within himself
In trepidation, from the blank abyss
To look with bodily eyes, and be consoled.¹⁶⁵

Noting a crucifix that adorns the inner walls “as if / Hands of angelic powers had fixed it there”, the observer imagines this holy space as a “Memorial revered by a thousand storms; / Yet then, from the indiscriminating sweep / And rage of one State-whirlwind, insecure.”¹⁶⁶ In Wasserman’s poem, on the mention of ‘chartreuse’ “the sky swirled,” accentuating the imaginative entry into “God’s territory,” an insecurity different in kind to the insecurity that Wordsworth sees instigated by the ‘sweep and rage’ of Revolutionary forces on the otherworldly solitude of the monastery.

Sixty or so years later (and perhaps after reading Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, first published in 1850), Matthew Arnold takes his visit to the monastery as a chance to meditate on his own troubled faith. He is no friend to the “Brotherhood austere”¹⁶⁷ but imagines himself “Wandering between two worlds, one dead, / The other powerless to be born . . .,”¹⁶⁸ speaking as

on some far northern strand,
Thinking of his own Gods, a Greek
In pity and mournful awe might stand
Before some fallen Runic stone—
For both were faiths, and both are gone.¹⁶⁹

163 Ibid., p. 154. Line 451.

164 Ibid., p. 153. Lines 427–429.

165 Ibid., p. 154. Lines 468–471.

166 Ibid., p. 155. Lines 484–488.

167 Matthew Arnold, “Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse,” in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. M. H. Abrams and Stephen Greenblatt (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), p. 1494. Line 65.

168 Ibid., p. 1495. Lines 85–86.

169 Ibid., p. 1405. Lines 80–84.

Where Wordsworth saw the religious solitude of “God’s territory” at Chartreuse as needing defence against dissolution, Arnold, caught in his own agnosticism, simply wants to be hidden here in the “gloom profound”¹⁷⁰ to contemplate his own wanderings and perhaps torment himself by imitating Wasserman’s Jacob who pokes “a stick at the angel’s throat / to make it speak”;

Ah, if it *be* passed, take away,
At least, the restlessness, the pain;
Be man henceforth no more a prey
To these outdated stings again.¹⁷¹

Ruth Kartun-Blum emphasized that, because of the nature of revived Hebrew, “texts are almost doomed to become intertextual.”¹⁷² Although the intertextuality explored here (exploding from suggested resonances between different poets) is not the same as the linguistic stratification of modern and biblical Hebrew, it is possible to see how writing with empty-full names (‘Language is naming’ as Scholem puts it) immediately requires reading other texts together. As we saw above, George Aichele argued that, even though canon might function as a semiotic mechanism, because most words are symbols (and have this empty, abyssal dimension that haunts Derrida’s work so much), they are “dependent upon human culture and therefore profoundly ideological . . . and their meanings can only be learned intertextually, in the play of language.”¹⁷³ Wasserman’s poetic paragesis plays with the interpretants, the connotations that demand that we read intertextually, that we learn what the bird-angel’s groaning and whisperings bring into the heart of the biblical story.

The final annunciation by the angel is to cough ‘Israel’, returning us forcefully to the Genesis text, but this is not a renaming of Jacob—this naming makes the land “sacred, the wilderness, home.” The naming has made the hostility of the wilderness into the ‘at-home’ of the hospitable. And yet, a sacred land holds the same volcanic dangers that Scholem (and Derrida) feared in a sacred language. Here the sacred language and the sacred land are bound (*reliigare*) together. And still this Jacob is not content. Perhaps with an echo of the Jacob of Genesis demanding a name from his assailant (32:29), in the poem

170 Ibid., p. 1495. Line 91.

171 Ibid. Lines 103–105.

172 Kartun-Blum, *Profane Scriptures: Reflections on the Dialogue with the Bible in Modern Hebrew Poetry*, p. xi.

173 Aichele, *The Control of Biblical Meaning: Canon as Semiotic Mechanism*, p. 131.

he wants to make the angel speak again, to release the volcano, to “make the earth crack.”

Performing the ‘Act-Event’ of Canon

The three poems that I have read here offer ways of appropriating and recasting Gen. 32:22–32 that foreground the iterable movement between canonical and extra-canonical materials. The ideal types of Bible that have been constituted in these parageses have been mobile between ‘poetic’ forms—the need to respond to a story cast as heavy with ‘literary’ momentum—and its ‘historical’ type, that is, biblical material imagined as emanating from a foreign and archaic ‘original’. Although all written in a broadly lyric style, I have been using them as examples of how this ‘vulgar’ writing around a canonical text operates to problematize how certain forms of interpretative writing are deemed more legitimate than others.

I have argued that in order for them to work as paragetical acts of rewriting, the imagined limits and permissions of the double-canoncities of Bible are enacted in a kind of *canonography*. Following the work of George Aichele, Philip Davies, John Barton and John Guillory, we have seen how a scribal technology is at the heart of accessing and making meaning with biblical texts. For Davies, the early Hasmonean scribes created a Jewish textual corpus to keep a burgeoning Greek literature at bay. The rabbis then cemented this sense of a Hebrew Bible against the Greek Christian Bible. Barton emphasized that although the Marcionite heresy has historically been seen as the moment at which a Christian canon is fixed out of necessity, it is better argued that the ‘effective’ canon is fluid and that, in fact, a more telling analysis demonstrates that some New Testament books are more important to the Apostolic (canonizing) Fathers than others. An index of citation effects a book’s inclusion in the canon and thus citation equals authority.

Although the literary and the religious canon are not necessarily constituted in the same way, in the double-canon of the biblical they haunt one another’s potential act-events. The debates around the canon in the literary sphere have important implications for critical access to the biblical canon too. As Guillory emphasizes “it is an interesting consequence of the canon debate that it has called every act of judgement into question, not simply because judgement is always historical, local, or institutional, but more profoundly because it is exercised at all.”¹⁷⁴ These implications of a cultural literacy as a “*systematic regula-*

174 Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, p. 29.

tion of reading and writing,”¹⁷⁵ have had an influence on Aichele’s analysis of the biblical canon as a semiotic mechanism. For Aichele, the canon “frames the act of discovering or receiving or creating a meaningful world”¹⁷⁶ and is, primarily, a negative control over meaning production. However, Aichele focuses on how texts are not explicitly meaningful but need to be “forcibly filled from beyond the text.”¹⁷⁷ It is in this textual ‘beyond’ (which is also *within* the scriptural economy and the decisions that circle *l’écriture*) that we find the poetic paragesis.

This work has provided the elements of the multifaceted canonizing process; how writing practices (transmitting, editing, collating, archiving, accessing, citing and so forth) continue to be enacted in a kind of circular dance where inventive writing both produces and *constructs* different canonical authorities and attempts to play with and undermine them in the same moment. As a conclusion to this chapter, I shall offer a few thoughts as to how ‘canon’ is better envisaged or imagined as a constituent part of the reading and rewriting *act-event* rather than an authoritative entity in itself.

Alterity, Invention, Singularity

Poetic parageses are *acts* of rewriting that are enacted within a scriptural economy. As Derek Attridge explains,

literary texts . . . are acts of writing that call forth acts of reading: [. . .] it is important to remain aware of the polysemy of the term *act*: as both ‘serious’ performance and ‘staged’ performance, as a ‘proper’ doing and an improper or temporary one, as an action, a law governing actions, and a record documenting actions.¹⁷⁸

In order to stage a reading and writing performance, poetic parageses also enact, invoke, ‘acts’ of canon, that is to say, the imaginary canon becomes a ‘law governing actions’ and interpretations. Reading Derrida’s ‘Che Cos’è La Poesia?’¹⁷⁹ Attridge notes that “the poem has the power both to speak to your most intimate feelings and thoughts, and at the same time to reveal how even these private depths are always made possible by otherness and exteriority, always passing through the institution, the law, that which is not you,

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁷⁶ Aichele, *The Control of Biblical Meaning: Canon as Semiotic Mechanism*, p. 22.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 9.

¹⁷⁸ Attridge, “Introduction: Derrida and the Questioning of Literature,” p. 2.

¹⁷⁹ Derrida, “Che cos’è la poesia?”

which calls to you, and without which 'you' could not come into being."¹⁸⁰ By acknowledging that any notion of a private autotelic self is part of a solipsistic romanticism the poetic paragesis is able to avoid some of these traps. I position the double-canon of the biblical for the paragetical writer as an overarching law-act which brings the retelling into being as a possible work. A paragesis cannot be simply brought into being from a 'private' imagination.

Casting the poetic paragesis as a literary work of art "can be usefully understood by means of a trinity of terms, each of which is implicated in the other two: *alterity*, *invention*, and *singularity*."¹⁸¹ For Attridge, alterity "is the introduction into the known of that which it excludes in constituting itself as the known."¹⁸² As we have seen, the outsider status of poetry in the 'epistemological decorum' of much biblical criticism is key to understanding how the paragetical act casts light on the constitution of 'proper' knowledge; by keeping the poetic word at bay, criticism knows itself. Likewise, the canonical is maintained by excluding the non-canonical—the poetic paragesis utilizes and imports that excluded material into the 'known'.

Continuing with Attridge's terminology, "the coming-into-being of the work of art is . . . both an *act* and an *event*; it is something the artist *does* . . . and something that *happens to* the artist. [. . .] this act-event is . . . *invention*, a handy term since it refers also to the product of the act-event."¹⁸³ The poet both invents and is invented by the act-event of the work *and* its relation to the canonical biblical material. As we noted with Coleridge's complex theory of imagination, this heuristic-aesthetic *invenio* becomes that space of synthetic reason to exercise its 'esemplastic' power. Coleridge writes with and on the poetic Bible but it also 'finds him', an act of writing and an event in writing and being written. This is also what I mean by the 'canon' as being that which is part of the act-event of paragetical writing—for Coleridge, the poetic Bible *happens* in the writing as a necessary mechanism that also creates the paragesis. It is a canonography.

Attridge continues: "Invention, as Derrida puts it, is always the *invention of the other* [. . .]. And what is invented is always—this is the third of the three interrelated terms—*singular*. *Singularity*, in the sense in which I am using it, depends on openness to change and porousness in new contexts."¹⁸⁴ This is the paradox of the poem that repeats or iterates biblical material. This repeatability itself ensures "that the full presence of a singularity thus repeated comports

180 Attridge, "Introduction: Derrida and the Questioning of Literature," p. 22.

181 Attridge, "Performing Metaphors: The Singularity of Literary Figuration," p. 19.

182 Ibid.

183 Ibid.

184 Ibid., pp. 19–20.

in itself the reference to something else, thus rending the full presence that it nevertheless announces. This is why iteration is not simply repetition.”¹⁸⁵

The poetic paragesis, spun out between double-canoncities, always refers to something else. In fact, in its horizontal referentiality, it is an act-event of reading and writing the biblical. It announces the revenant of the biblical but can never make the biblical writing fully present ‘in itself’, that quest that much historical-criticism attempts. What the pharmakon of literary writing does is to *stage* referentiality so that “while it continues to propel the hearer or reader in this manner it simultaneously interrupts the process by making the very process of referral part of the point: we are affected not just by what is being referred to but by the power of language to refer, and of *this* language to refer in *this* way.”¹⁸⁶

In chapter two, I explored how Barton’s contention that biblical criticism has always been ‘literary’ at its heart opened a way for me to bring the dangers of the poetic into the critical fold. As I have argued, this is one of the important disillusioning aspects of the poetic paragesis as literary and interpretative work—it brings to light some of the institutions and constitutions of critical *knowing*. This is where we come up against a primary paradox in literary acts of writing: the refusal for writing to be arrested long enough to be fully present with meaning, the refusal of a paraphrase, excavated and cited elsewhere. The musicality, the texture of poetry, the pleasure of language in its materiality, pushes against representation or sense as first cause of writing. The problem with fixing literary works as ‘modes of exegesis’ is that they do not necessarily offer critical knowledge. The performance of ‘knowability’ which becomes particularly acute in a poetic retelling of biblical material paradoxically heightens our awareness of biblical criticism itself as an ‘act of writing’, embedded in a cultural history of biblical reading. The polysemy at the heart of the word ‘act’ also demonstrates the performativity of biblical criticism and brings to light some of the institutions and constitutions of critical knowledge. As Attridge outlines, literary works do not necessarily offer knowledge, “but they may stage the knowability—or the unknowability—of the world by staging the processes whereby knowledge is articulated, or whereby its articulation is resisted.”¹⁸⁷ The mobility of the Bible between the different attempts at rejuvenating its authority on Enlightenment-Romantic terms—*philological* (textual) Bible, *poetic* Bible, *pedagogical* (moral) Bible, and *historical* Bible¹⁸⁸—have resulted

185 Jacques Derrida, “Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion,” in *Limited Inc*, ed. Gerald Graff (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p. 129.

186 Attridge, “Performing Metaphors: The Singularity of Literary Figuration,” pp. 20–21.

187 *Ibid.*, pp. 21–22.

188 Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture*, p. 217. My emphasis.

in variegated approaches to a diverse, ramified, and *imaginary* canon that also, and in many respects because of this movement, demonstrates Attridge's three-fold terminology of alterity, inventiveness, and singularity. This is what draws scholars and poets to return to it again and again. For Attridge, doing justice to such articulations means "finding some means to respond with an answering singularity, inventiveness, and alterity. Indeed, there is a sense in which it is only in such inventive responses that the work comes into existence—as an act/event—at all."¹⁸⁹

If poetic parageses can then be seen as an answering response to such a double-canonical act-event then

we have to do justice to it as an event, and to the eventness of that event. It must happen anew in our response, each time we read it. Putting it in a different metaphoric register, we must *perform* it; or more accurately, and preserving the undecidability between act and event, when we read a literary work as a literary work *we find ourselves performing it*.¹⁹⁰

This performance (as act) can be extended from the 'literary' to a wider sense of writing biblical criticism as an 'act', in the many senses of this term.

The next chapter takes the act-event of reading and writing within the act-event of the double-canonography into reading the (written) performances of divine and human male bodies. This is where the work on poetic parageses takes another turn, this time towards its valuable and practical potential for androcritical readings of Gen. 32:22–32. Following Mieke Bal's sense of the importance of saving "these religious canonical texts' *literariness* from *ethical indifference* . . . [this] gesture opens up the tight boundaries that separate and thus protect from each other the distinct domains of religion and literature on the level not of their texts or their functions, but of their *readings*."¹⁹¹ Reading and writing crosses the domains. This becomes a kind of 'turn to literature' in the broadest sense, including the thinking on the acts of reading and writing made available by literary theory. The combination of the aesthetic-ethic in androcritical paragetical readings is where we turn to next with this Bible, "still surviving, still living on, still miraculously overliving the message of its own death."¹⁹²

¹⁸⁹ Attridge, "Performing Metaphors: The Singularity of Literary Figuration," p. 27.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹⁹¹ Bal, "Religious Canon and Literary Identity," p. 23.

¹⁹² Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture*, p. 206.

Scripted Bodies: Paragesis and the Performative Poetics of Manhood

This chapter demonstrates how poetic parageses function as act-events that offer ways of reading biblical texts otherwise and, as such, offer themselves as particularly valuable modes of reading against normative interpretation. Prompted by the poets' attempts to focus on what is happening in this wrestling bout, I will explore how this scene problematizes the constructions and performances of human and divine masculinities. In so doing, I shall also be exploring how biblical criticism and poetic paragesis contribute to what is seen and not seen when reading and interpreting biblical texts. As Moore and Sherwood highlight, quoting Sheehan's index on the Enlightenment Bible, if the original project of the Enlightenment Bible consolidated under four fundamental headings—philology, history, aesthetics, and morality—

biblical scholarship soon abandoned the aesthetic and the ethical. Theory has revived the aesthetic, in the form of literary criticism, and also, most importantly, the moral, in the form of feminist biblical criticism, ideological criticism, and other approaches that directly engage the ethics or ideologies of biblical texts.¹

This revivification and merging of the aesthetic-ethical dimensions of biblical interpretation forms the backdrop to this section and provides an analysis of the 'use-value' of paragesis for biblical androcritical gender studies.

Although there is a burgeoning field of studies on various masculinities from a variety of critical idioms in other disciplines, work that directly addresses the formulation and performativity of biblical masculinities, whether in the biblical texts themselves or in the production of criticism by male authors, is still marginal.² In order to orientate my own approach to these

1 Moore and Sherwood, "Biblical Studies 'after' Theory: Onwards Towards the Past; Part Three: Theory in the First and Second Waves," pp. 214–215.

2 See Ovidiu Creanga, ed., *Men and Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible and Beyond* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2010) and David J. A. Clines's various articles on biblical masculinities including "David the Man: The Construction of Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible" in his *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995): pp. 212–41; "He-Prophets: Masculinity as a Problem for the Hebrew

questions, Daniel Patte's book *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: A Reevaluation*, seems to offer an insight into the possibility of an androcritical, multidimensional exegesis. However, it remains in the ante-room of the debates around gendered performances of identities, bodies, and knowledge production that have been continuously conducted in literary theory and cultural studies since second-wave feminism and the rise of gender studies. Patte concluded that "despite our denials, we [biblical exegetes] also have an advocacy stance. It is on behalf of male European-Americans (usually, a subgroup of them) that we practice critical exegeses. Being androcritical involves acknowledging this fact."³ However, if we agree with Deborah F. Sawyer that biblical studies has "existed as an effective white, western/colonial, patriarchal discourse—a microcosmic affirmation of western culture,"⁴ 'androcriticism' is to be pursued further than merely *acknowledging* what Patte takes to be fact. As I have explored above, a 'fact' is also always a participatory knowledge and never stands alone. If a discipline does not have the resources within its own constitution to achieve a high-level of self-reflective discourse that is able to analyse the act-events of reading and writing then this must come from elsewhere. This chapter argues, then, that to become more androcritical, to understand more of how issues of power and gender delineate the interpretative field, more hermeneutic dimensions must be included when constructing a biblical reading and rewriting. This is where paragetical writing comes into its own, participating in both "an indeterminate *surplus* of meaningful possibilities"⁵

Prophets and their Interpreters" in *Sense and Sensitivity: Essays on Reading the Bible in Memory of Robert Carroll*, eds. Alastair G. Hunter and Philip R. Davies (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002): pp. 311–28; and "Ecce Vir, or, Gendering the Son of Man," in *Biblical Studies/Cultural Studies: The Third Sheffield Colloquium*, eds. J. Cheryl Exum and Stephen D. Moore (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998): pp. 352–75. For examples of work on New Testament masculinities, see Stephen D. Moore, "'O Man, Who Art Thou . . . ?' Masculinity Studies and New Testament Studies", in *New Testament Masculinities*, ed. by Stephen D. Moore and Janice Capel Anderson, Semeia Studies (Atlanta: SBL, 2003): pp. 1–22; Jennifer Larson, "Paul's Masculinity", *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 123 (2004), 85–97; Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore, 'Matthew and Masculinity', in *New Testament Masculinities*, eds. Stephen D. Moore and Janice Capel Anderson, Semeia Studies (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), pp. 67–91; Colleen M. Conway, *Behold the Man: Jesus and Greco-Roman Masculinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

- 3 Daniel Patte, *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: A Reevaluation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), p. 126.
- 4 Deborah F. Sawyer, *God, Gender and the Bible* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 7.
- 5 Timothy K. Beal, "Ideology and Intertextuality: Surplus of Meaning and Controlling the Means of Production," in *Reading Between Texts: Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible*, ed.

whilst also enacting an awareness that “interpretation is always a *production* of meaning from that surplus.”⁶

Poetic Paragesis as Ethical Non-Indifference

Throughout my analysis I have been using de Certeau’s idea of a ‘scriptural economy’ and Derrida’s work on arche-writing as a way in to understanding that biblical textualities are part of a vast ‘semiosphere’ in which meaning is produced, controlled and disseminated. In the preceding chapter, I posited the notion of an imaginary *canonography* that is enacted through and surrounds paraetical writing. A poetic paragesis needs to deploy the double-canonicity of the Bible in order to bring the act-event of writing into being. However, we also noted that the canon can only ever be imagined and is never fully accessible to a reader in its totality. What does become available is the list of works, the syllabus, a pedagogical approach to managing and accessing the cultural capital of certain works within a scriptural economy. This is an unavoidable necessity. As Timothy Beal acknowledges,

for the practice of intertextual reading . . . as opposed to theories of intertextuality, one must have such lines of delimitation, no matter how arbitrarily they may be set, and no matter how quickly they may be transgressed. That is, no intertextual reading can choose the ‘general text’—everything, all at once, everywhere—as its object of interpretation . . . But what determines which intertextual relationships are legitimate and which are not? And what determines how ‘rightly’ to negotiate those relationships once they are established?⁷

For Beal, it is the reader’s ideological commitments that narrow down these lines of delimitation. But these lines of delimitation are not simply given—they are written. As we have seen, the labyrinth created by writing is inescapable, for “interpretation or solving of the puzzles of the textual web only adds more filaments to the web. One can never escape from the labyrinth because the activity of escaping makes more labyrinth, the thread of a linear narrative or story. Criticism is the production of more thread to embroider the texture or

Danna Nolan Fewell (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), p. 31. Emphasis in original.

6 Ibid. Emphasis in original.

7 Ibid., p. 28.

textile already there.”⁸ Thus the biblical critic and the poet choose to write different limits, different filaments, into their interpretative process. Part of the androcritical project is to recognize the strands that are involved in writing such a web.

In my analysis, canonography operates as an inescapable part of writing with and on the poetic and historical Bible. As such, this type of scriptural writing contributes to a cultural *l'écriture* that

is an *institution*: it is not given in nature or the brain but brought into being by processes that are social, legal, and political, and that can be mapped historically and geographically [. . .]. That a body of texts called ‘literary’ [or ‘biblical literature’] can, at a certain historical conjuncture, serve strategic purposes is not the result of any transcendent properties these texts possess, any permanent access to truth. Rather, it is an opportunity that can be seized, just as any individual text (literary or not, verbal or not) may proffer the chance of a productive and important intervention.⁹

Androcriticism questions the act-event of the representational writing that occurs within such institutions. If, as we saw in the first two chapters, ‘Bible’ becomes a project built on certain institutions of knowledge, questioning these constructions becomes a way of understanding the contingencies of biblical authority. Retelling biblical material is just such an opportunity for intervention and invention. Gerard Loughlin sees ‘Bible’ as a highly significant (and signifying) canonography, arguing that (with an echo of Coleridge’s *panharmoonicon*), for many

[t]he Bible writes our flesh, its meanings and possibilities. But writing is nothing if it is not read, and the distinction between writing and reading opens a space for movement, for a field of energy. This, indeed, is the field of religion, in which believers are bound (*religare*) over to the reading, again and again (*relegere*), of the texts by which they are both bound and set free.¹⁰

8 Miller, “Stevens’ Rock and Criticism as Cure, II,” p. 337. Qtd. Abrams, “The Deconstructive Angel,” p. 436.

9 Attridge, “Introduction: Derrida and the Questioning of Literature,” p. 23.

10 Gerard Loughlin, “The Body,” in *The Blackwell Companion to the Bible and Culture*, ed. John F. A. Sawyer (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2006), p. 381.

Although hardly the only source for writing the meanings of 'our flesh', a biblically infused religio-cultural imaginary has contributed to the ways in which men and women have lived their own bodily realities. If genders are enacted or performed, as we shall explore below, then a certain *l'écriture* has to be delimited from the 'general text' and gendered scripts are written and rewritten from canonographical materials. The 'critical' (and the poetic) are part of these gendered performances of delineation.

If *l'écriture*, and biblical texts in particular, can be said to communicate the meanings and possibilities of corporeal, enacted and performed bodies, how are we to understand the textual constructions of divine and human male bodies that men and women are bound to read again and again as part of a cultural semiosphere? If biblical depictions of male patriarchal power have had enormous cultural influence across the years in which the bible has been sourced as an authoritative text (with authoritative interpretations), then it is not simply believers and Bible readers who are bound into an intertextuality of which this Bible is part and who are forced to stretch the limits and ligatures of the influence of these particular texts. Feminist scholar and poet Alicia Ostriker understands her revisionary work as trying to locate herself "with respect to the looming male tradition of religion, myth, philosophy, and literature"¹¹ highlighting that the Bible "is the ultimate authority for so many other texts; and, what is more, we can observe within biblical narrative the actual process of patriarchy constructing itself. We watch the Law of the Father gathering its material and building itself up, bit by bit, layer upon layer."¹² However, like any artefact that is constructed from that strangest and most potent of materials—language—there are points of articulation where structures break down and the materials can be arranged otherwise to produce a different reading.

In this respect, the act-event of canonography becomes significant. Because a biblical scene such as Gen. 32:22–32 is read between literary and religious canons, the possibility for what Mieke Bal calls an 'ethical non-indifference' opens up. As an example of this, Bal positions Thomas Mann's fleshing out of the story of Potiphar's wife and Joseph in *Joseph and His Brothers* (1933–43) as a semantic space between literary canon and religious canons, biblical and Q'uranic. It is in this space of relegere/religare that Bal notes that "first, *literariness* is a tool for identity formation; second, religious canonicity is not premised on that formation but allows, even facilitates it."¹³ One might say that the religious canonicity of a story *permits* the forming of literary identities.

11 Alicia Suskin Ostriker, *Feminist Revision and the Bible* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), p. 27.

12 Ibid., p. 121.

13 Bal, "Religious Canon and Literary Identity," p. 18.

The literary aesthetic, through an interested ethic, builds on the shared *literariness* between canons and intervenes to rewrite a story within the religious canon. As Bal explains,

[...] recognising that religious canons are fixed forever and by political powers, and that they have oppressive power in that they police boundaries, I nevertheless claim that their texts' canonical status is also informed, strengthened, if not determined, by the kind of literary, aesthetic achievement that informs the looser and more changeable literary canon. Conversely, the literary features of the texts produce effects that are ethically non-indifferent, so that the neat distinction between the two types of canon falls apart. This has led to the political need to open up literary canons even if religious canons, different in that they are definite, are beyond such revisions. This is why... the canon cannot be truly opened up by inclusions only; *revisionist interpretations of religious canonical texts must continue to be made*.¹⁴

Such revisionist interpretations signify a 'turn to literature' for advocacy theorists and critics in biblical studies. Although Bal might be overstating the fixed nature of religious canonicity somewhat (the previous chapter demonstrated that biblical studies has always been fascinated with the production of multiple canons) her sense of the revisionist potential of literary rewriting within a broader canonography is extremely important for the androcritical trajectories I am tracing here. As she argues, opening up the canon is "not simply a matter of inclusion but of radically transforming what the word 'canon' means. The literary identity helps the difference between the two canons to keep, so to speak, a foot in the door of the closed religious canons."¹⁵ The foot in the door is a kind of enforced hospitality, the kind of hospitality that canonical *différance* maintains. The literary act of rewriting performs the alterity, invention, and singularity of responding to biblical texts (keeping a foot in the door) and, as Attridge underlines, "stages the knowability—or the unknowability—of the world by staging the processes whereby knowledge is articulated, or whereby its articulation is resisted."¹⁶ The performance of 'knowability' which becomes particularly acute in a poetic retelling of biblical material paradoxically heightens our awareness of biblical criticism itself as an 'act of writing', embedded in gendered cultural histories, policing the interpretative efforts of

14 Ibid., p. 22. My emphasis.

15 Ibid., p. 26.

16 Attridge, "Performing Metaphors: The Singularity of Literary Figuration," pp. 21–22.

those marginalized from the critical centre. The type of paragetical writing I am utilizing cannot be ethically indifferent; it stages an aesthetic-ethic response to texts that are mobile between literary and religious canons. With such mobility comes a renewed appreciation that different forms of interpretation provide different means of arresting the texts.

Critical Men's Studies and Androcriticism in Biblical Studies

In order for biblical studies to become more aware of its own staging and articulation of knowledge, other disciplinary perspectives on writing, interpretation, and the scriptural economy are vital. This is especially the case when analyses of the power-knowledge paradigm are to be made. I am arguing that, because the poetic paragesis foregrounds the act of interpreting and reiterating biblical material, it provides an interpretative position from which to perform multidimensional approaches to making meaning from the Bible.

I have already traced some of the ways in which 'epistemological decorum' has been maintained in biblical studies through the defence of correct critical-methodological apparatus against those readers that might access biblical material for 'pre-critical' or 'un-critical' gain. I have also demonstrated how this is linked with a scribal culture that controls access to a (biblical) cultural capital—that ideological system of exchange value from which identity politics are formed and performed—through only hosting certain types of legitimated writing.

I now turn to another knotty strand of epistemological delimitation on the biblical, the androcentric interests that elide the fact "that most scholarship, in the conventional sense, has been about men, and [paradoxically], that such scholarship, in perhaps a more significant sense, has not really been about men at all."¹⁷ In other words, much biblical criticism has pursued work that implicitly or explicitly serves the "concerns and interests of European-American males"¹⁸ whilst also side-lining work in feminist criticism, gender studies, and the increasingly prominent field of critical men's studies that is 'about men' and focuses on 'maleness' and masculinity as a nexus of cultural affirmations and denials around embodied men themselves. While I shall not cover the genealogies of the work and debates being pursued across the

17 Harry Brod, "Introduction: Themes and Theses of Men's Studies," in *The Making of Masculinities: The New Men's Studies*, ed. Harry Brod (Winchester, Ma.: Allen & Unwin, 1987), p. 2.

18 Patte, *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: A Reevaluation*, p. 12.

variegated terrain of critical men's studies here,¹⁹ I shall be utilizing insights from this interdisciplinary field in the analysis below. First, I want to turn to biblical scholar Daniel Patte's understanding of androcriticism in order to frame some of the limits of his approach and explore how poetic parageses provide a much broader and complex sense of what might be involved in an androcritical stance.

Patte acknowledges that he is an exegete "committed to the production of critical readings of the Bible, that is, readings that establish and verify their own legitimacy through the use of critical methods, themselves based upon critical (scientific) theories."²⁰ However, he also affirms that his position as an exegete is grounded in being a white male, raised and educated in Europe and North America and, as such, his interpretations can be "either 'androcentric' and 'Eurocentric' . . . or 'androcritical'."²¹ With this in mind, he comes to the conclusion that the critic must balance the scales between an 'ethics of responsibility' toward the biblical text and an 'ethics of accountability' toward the diverse communities for which exegetes might be interpreting. As such, "despite all our good intentions, we fail to be ethically responsible so long as we practice critical biblical exegesis in a traditional manner"²² and that the only way to proceed "is thus to affirm the legitimacy of several different approaches, while recognising the limitations of each."²³

19 Suffice it to say, as in any field of study, there are myriad nuances to every side of the debate. Björn Krondorfer provides an enlightening overview to what he calls 'critical men's studies *in religion*' in the introduction to his edited volume *Men and Masculinities in Christianity and Judaism: A Critical Reader*. He emphasizes that a critical study "does not disapprove of religion in general, but, instead, questions the implicit and normative gender assumptions of men as they engage in, and are engaged by, religious traditions." Björn Krondorfer, "Introduction," in *Men and Masculinities in Christianity and Judaism: A Critical Reader*, ed. Björn Krondorfer (London: SCM, 2009), p. xi. Krondorfer notes that the AAR Men's Studies in Religion Group published Stephen B. Boyd, W. Merle Longwood, and Mark W. Muesse, eds., *Redeeming Men: Religion and Masculinities* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996) and Björn Krondorfer, ed. *Men's Bodies, Men's Gods: Male Identities in a (Post-) Christian Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), but much of the work on masculinities is still done in sociological studies that tend to reduce or elide the specifically 'religious' background to some male practices and performances. See Harry Brod, ed. *The Making of Masculinities: The New Men's Studies* (Winchester, Ma.: Allen & Unwin, 1987) and Harry Brod and Michael Kaufman, eds., *Theorizing Masculinities* (Thousand Oaks, Ca.: Sage, 1994).

20 Patte, *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: A Reevaluation*, p. 1.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid., p. 3.

23 Ibid., p. 4.

These are laudable insights and I do not wish to undermine such sentiments. However, when it comes to practicing and affirming a multidimensional response to biblical texts, there are echoes of the cringes we have already seen in the work of those who must maintain certain forms of the 'critical' as a constitutional stance. In the work on disciplining the imagination in chapter three, we saw how Izaak J. de Hulster showed his concern with too much imaginative freedom, arguing that "every association and suggestion, everything that intuition and imagination bring, should be checked methodologically."²⁴ Epistemological decorum must be maintained. In a similar way for Patte, the conclusion that

in order to be accountable to those affected by our work, we need to use several methodologies in our exegetical and pedagogical practices does not mean that we should seek to develop eclectic procedures that would combine the use of several methodologies. On the contrary, it presupposes that each methodology is used with rigour and integrity by applying the specific set of critical methods based on it, so as to develop its distinct series of critical studies of the text.²⁵

What Patte is calling for is "the performance or presentation of a plurality of such critical exegeses rather than a single one."²⁶ However, this strict methodological purity that produces multiple but carefully delineated interpretations, eschewing eclecticism (or *bricolage*) for rigour and integrity, ultimately fails to address the first half of the neologism *androcriticism*. In fact, I would argue that it is precisely this desire for rigorous exegetical purity that hamstringing this purported androcriticism from the start. Maintaining strict boundaries between the pure and impure, whether that is between mutable, fleshly bodies and eternal, disembodied Logocentric minds or myriad other binary oppositions, has been a mainstay of patriarchal, hierarchical constructs. A "recurrent feature of dualistic constructs, and one which principally accounts for their hierarchical organisation, is the tendency for only one term in any pair of opposites to be seen as positive, or possessing its own identity, while the other term is seen as derivative, taking its identity from its opposite."²⁷ A paragetical poet-critic such as Ostriker argues, by contrast, that "I interpret the Bible, while it interprets me. Absolutely no room in this work for a distance between self

²⁴ Hulster, "Imagination: A Hermeneutical Tool for the Study of the Hebrew Bible," p. 116.

²⁵ Patte, *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: A Reevaluation*, p. 49.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Rutledge, *Reading Marginally: Feminism, Deconstruction and the Bible*, pp. 46–47.

and text, or the false duality of subject and object. We intermingle and bleed into each other.”²⁸

Stemming such a porous ‘bleeding’, particularly if the intermingling is with a religious text, has been a significant part of the performance of a critical, liberal and enlightened masculine self. Indeed, as Jonathan Culler has shown,

if one tried to imagine the literary criticism of a patriarchal culture, one might predict several likely concerns: (1) that the role of the author would be conceived as a paternal one [. . .] (2) that much would be invested in paternal authors [. . .] (3) that there would be great concern about which meanings were legitimate and which illegitimate (since the paternal author’s role in the generation of meanings can only be inferred); and that criticism would expend great efforts to develop principles for, on the one hand, determining which meanings were truly the author’s own progeny, and on the other hand, controlling intercourse with texts so as to prevent the proliferation of illegitimate interpretations.²⁹

Patte is also concerned with questions of paternal legitimacy. He affirms that critical readings “do make explicit (bring to critical understanding) the legitimacy of ordinary readings and in the process refine them; but conversely, ordinary readings (as expressions of ways in which texts actually affect people) are the source of the legitimacy of critical readings.”³⁰ However, he never investigates the multiple and gendered lines of desire, suspicion, and indeterminacy³¹ that run through such, so-called, ‘ordinary’ readings. His sense of androcriticism is focussed on his conclusion that “*the goal of critical exegesis is the bringing to critical understanding of an ordinary reading*. According to this androcritical definition, a critical reading should not be envisioned as a negative assessment of ordinary readings, but as the elucidation of the actual features of the text (and its context) that are reflected by ordinary readings.”³²

28 Ostriker, *Feminist Revision and the Bible*, p. 112.

29 Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1987), pp. 60–61. Qtd. Rutledge, *Reading Marginally: Feminism, Deconstruction and the Bible*, p. 61.

30 Patte, *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: A Reevaluation*, pp. 93–94.

31 Ostriker suggests that “biblical revisionism takes three sometimes overlapping forms: a hermeneutics of suspicion, a hermeneutics of desire, and a hermeneutics of indeterminacy . . . this triple model of (re)interpretative modes might well serve to describe how writers of any marginalized group come ultimately to deal with the dominant culture which both inspires and repels them.” Ostriker, *Feminist Revision and the Bible*, p. 57.

32 Patte, *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: A Reevaluation*, p. 74. Emphasis in original.

Ultimately, “we readers cannot but respond and react to what the text proposes to us. Because it is written, fixed on pages, the text constantly remains in control, in a position of power; it keeps the initiative, it sets the subject matter of our dialogue.”³³

Once again, the text is deemed as sovereign authority, reader as passive subject. I want to argue that, contra Patte, the way to be more *androcritical*, combining the two sides of the neologism in a useful binding, is to allow for more multidimensional analysis of both the content that one is interpreting and how this creates and impinges upon the interpreter. This is the act-event of reading and writing on the biblical text, the event of the new iteration enacting a writing subject. The creative and the critical act creates the *andro* performing (acting) the exegesis, whether critic or poet. When Patte defines biblical criticism as the ‘bringing to critical understanding of an ordinary reading’ he is careful to demonstrate that it is the ‘ordinary’ reading that founds the ‘critical’. However, merely allowing the ‘ordinary’ more of a part to play in the hierarchical formation of the ‘critical’ does not make for *androcriticism*, a writing that becomes more aware of how masculinities are performed and veiled in the creative-critical process, and how these are bound up with decisions on legitimising the meaning of biblical texts. The wrestling bout of Jacob with his adversary is the perfect homosocial scene on which to allow multidimensional poetic parages to provoke a broader sense of an ethically non-indifferent biblical *androcriticism*.

Creating the Textual Spectacle of Genesis 32:22–32: All-in Wrestling with Barthes, Westermann and Gunkel

As Valentine Cunningham notes in his introduction to Roland Barthes’ essay, ‘Wrestling with the Angel: Textual Analysis of Gen. 32:23–33’, “analysing Jacob’s struggle was a Barthesian reading encounter waiting to happen”³⁴ and it is because of Barthes that “wrestling Jacob has become an icon of poststructuralist critique, the text of this story one of the most versatile and necessary of critical sites.”³⁵ For Barthes this episode seemed to exemplify multiple impulses in his own work: an understanding of the allegorical themes of the Protestant conscience, wrestling and burdened before a masterful God,

33 Ibid., p. 98.

34 Valentine Cunningham, “Roland Barthes (1915–1980): An Introduction,” in *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader*, ed. Graham Ward (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1997), p. 77.

35 Ibid., p. 74.

limping away from the scene with a mixed blessing (as we saw in Calvin and Luther's readings of this scene); and, at another level, the conflict and struggle with the structures and frictionalities of texts, the critical act as a "doing of necessary violence . . . a matter of *ungluing* the text, tearing off its protective shells."³⁶ To further reflect upon Barthes' presuppositions in his essay, I will refer to another work of his, published some years before 'Wrestling with the Angel'—'The World of Wrestling'.³⁷ This will frame the backdrop to his response to the biblical text and will posit an important sense of the *spectacle* of the Genesis scene and the signs it generates. Perhaps a middle way between the focus of the biblical critic and the dissemination of textual analysis and poetic paragesis can be seen in Geoffrey Hartman's idea of the redactional process, provable or not, "as descriptive of a style in which every sentence is a jealously guarded deposit, as if language had to have authority, whatever uncertainties encompassed the reported event or act of naming it."³⁸ The necessity of recording these deposits has resulted in a 'frictionality' that exhibits a "capacity to leave traces, which incite or even demand interpretation of what it has incorporated."³⁹

The incoherence of the opening of 32:22 raises important questions as to how the forthcoming spectacle of combat is framed. Hermann Gunkel reads the seemingly confused crossing passage (where Jacob initially seems to take his wives, children and possessions across the Jabbok, but then, in the next sentence, is said to have sent them across while he remained on the opposite bank, alone) as an example of how, "in many aspects a dual recension becomes apparent"⁴⁰ between the Yahwist and Elohist redactors. In contrast, Claus Westermann understands this as "an itinerary note . . . independent of the narrative that follows."⁴¹ He observes that only a few exegetes hold to this story's composition from two sources, but he does emphasize that "the text has undergone a process of growth"⁴² and it is possible to identify verses and words that have been added subsequently to a more original unity, possibly by the Yahwist redactor (often referred to as J). However, Barthes prefers to let the final, structurally redundant form of this beginning create "an abrasion, a grating of

36 Ibid., p. 78.

37 Roland Barthes, "The World of Wrestling," in *Mythologies* (London: Vintage, 2000).

38 Hartman, "The Struggle for the Text," p. 5.

39 Ibid., p. 13.

40 Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*, trans. Mark E. Biddle (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1997), p. 347.

41 Westermann, *Genesis 12–36: A Commentary*, p. 516.

42 Ibid., p. 514.

readability.”⁴³ This ‘abrasion’ is not to be explained away but allowed to stand as a catalyst for the ‘open’ readings which he is trying to promote.

Following Barthes’ analysis, if Jacob is left alone before crossing the Jabbok then “we are led to a ‘folklorist’ reading of the episode”⁴⁴ where Jacob must be tested by a ‘trial by combat’ with a demon or numen, a spirit who defends the river and attacks any who dare to cross. On the other hand, if we read Jacob as having crossed the Jabbok with his entourage, then we are left with him waiting alone at his destination, a crossing “that is without structural finality” but that “acquires a religious finality: if Jacob is alone, it is not in order to regulate and obtain the crossing, it is to *mark himself* by solitude (this is the familiar *setting apart* of the chosen of God).”⁴⁵ Of the meaning-potential of the two ambiguities, Barthes would seem to prefer the latter. This ‘setting apart’ frames the combat scene in a more audacious way, allowing Barthes, in his analysis, to read YHWH as both Sender and Opponent, broadening his analysis from the more Proppian folkloric telling. If Barthes is committed to reading the signs of wrestling as “the spectacle of excess,”⁴⁶ as is suggested by his earlier ‘World of Wrestling’ essay, then perhaps his imagining of the scene is more one of YHWH entering the wrestling ring where Jacob waits at the “probable site of Penueel . . . [where the river] Nahr el-Zarka winds its tortuous way, circling about like a wrestler.”⁴⁷ This is a theatricality of combat rather than an audacious attack whilst crossing a river.

It is important to note that Barthes reads the signs of boxing and wrestling differently. Firstly, he highlights that a boxing-match “is a story which is constructed before the eyes of the spectator; in wrestling, on the contrary, it is each moment which is intelligible not the passage of time.”⁴⁸ The Genesis event takes place for an unspecified time, but it suggests that the combatants struggled until the break of dawn. Even with this time-frame in place, the brevity and structure of the passage itself lends itself to moments of action that must be made intelligible with exchanges, physical and verbal, that require weaving into an interpretation. But how would such an interpretation proceed? For

43 Roland Barthes, “Wrestling with the Angel: Textual Analysis of Genesis 32:23–33,” in *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader*, ed. Graham Ward (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1997), p. 87.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 Barthes, “The World of Wrestling,” p. 15.

47 Schmidt, “The Numen of Penueel,” p. 273.

48 Barthes, “The World of Wrestling,” p. 16.

Barthes, wrestling may not provide a teleological storyline even if it does offer a dramatization. In his view, wrestling

demands an immediate reading of the juxtaposed meanings, so there is no need to connect them. The logical conclusion of the contest does not interest the wrestling-fan, while on the contrary a boxing match always implies a science of the future. In other words, wrestling is a sum of spectacles, of which no single one is a function: each moment imposes the total knowledge of a passion which arises erect and alone, without ever extending to the crowning moment of a result.⁴⁹

This can be linked with what the biblical commentators tell us. If Gunkel sees this episode as demonstrating two strands of an ancient folktale, collated and redacted by the Yahwist, then he also implicitly understands this scene more as a 'timeless' spectacle than a chronological narrative. As he writes,

these elements, that the deity attacks a person at night, unknown, and wrestles with him . . . demonstrate the very advanced age of the account. Furthermore, the fact that they do not fight with weapons, but by wrestling, body against body, also points to a very ancient period. This is the character of fights in the earliest myths, for example, Hercules against Antaios, Hercules and Samson against lions. The fact that the god and man fight with one another, at first indecisively, and then with roughly equal strength, indeed, that the man finally defeats the god (v. 29), is also a sign of the earliest period.⁵⁰

These mythological elements suggest to Gunkel (and many other commentators) that an original and much older mythological scene of struggle or combat has been worked up into a more meaningful narrative by later redactors. In a similar vein, Westermann attempts to separate the additions to this earlier form highlighting that "without the additions, it is closer to a report because the contest is not narrated in detail."⁵¹ He breaks the story down in the following way;

49 Ibid.

50 Gunkel, *Genesis*, p. 349.

51 Westermann, *Genesis 12–36: A Commentary*, p. 514.

- vv. 23–24 Introduction (itinerary)
- 25 Attack, a man wrestled with him
- 26–30 Outcome of the struggle
 - 26a–27a Opponent's request to let him go
 - 27b–30a Jacob's counter, condition, request for name
 - 30b Attacker refuses name, blesses Jacob
- Conclusion: Jacob names the place
- 32a Conclusion: Merging into itinerary⁵²

At this early stage, narrative is rudimentary and we are much closer to Barthes' ideas of wrestling as a juxtaposed 'sum of spectacles'. The redacted text may give Jacob the victory through the renaming as Israel, but Barthes diffuses this result as one that would fit more with the victory signs of a boxing-match than a wrestling bout. He prefers to read the entire episode as "*the creation of a multiple trace*: in Jacob's body, in the status of the Brothers, in Jacob's name, in the name of the place, in eating (the creation of an alimentary taboo: the whole story can also be interpreted *a minimo* as the mythic foundation of a taboo)." ⁵³

The poems that I have cited as examples of parageses also regularly fail to find a 'result' for the wrestling match. As Barthes has warned us above, if we rush to a result, we miss the fact that "wrestling . . . offers excessive gestures, exploited to the limit of their meaning."⁵⁴ The 'excessive gesture' that has generated such diverse response from poets, philologists, biblical critics and theologians is that of the 'below the belt' move, the striking of the thigh/hip. If we are to continue reading this story as a textual spectacle that, following Barthes is read for its signs, then we are also an audience, demanding action and theatricality. In the same way, the characters that Barthes describes as inhabiting the French wrestling hall—Thauvin (an ignoble traitor), Reinières ('the moving image of passivity'), Mazaud (short and arrogant like a cock) and Orsano (a 'vindictive *salope*, or bitch')⁵⁵—are signs of theatricality, surface demonstrations of typology. Psychic depth is not what is called for; creative and critical audiences are reading the spectacle and "above the fundamental meaning of

52 Ibid. NB. The numbering is different here from the Jerusalem Bible version that Barthes is using in his analysis. The JB version conflates vv. 31 and 32. The etiological addition as to why the 'sciatic nerve' is taboo is numbered v. 33 in BHS and v. 32 in the JB version. The above citation mirrors the formatting of Westermann's texts.

53 Barthes, "Wrestling with the Angel: Textual Analysis of Genesis 32:23–33," p. 91.

54 Barthes, "The World of Wrestling," p. 16.

55 Ibid., pp. 17–18.

his body, the wrestler arranges comments which are episodic but always opportune, and constantly help the reading of the fight by means of gestures, attitudes and mimicry which make the intention utterly obvious.”⁵⁶ However, as we shall see, these intentions are not so obvious on a textual level, a fact that has resulted in the production of so much interpretative work around the central gesture that Barthes designates as the *coup de Jarnac*.⁵⁷ Cunningham reminds us, that in reading these struggles,

at the Jabbok, at Jarnac, with Jarnac, in the wrestling ring, Barthes appears to be mindful (for these fights are all being taken as allegories of reading and interpretation) of what he considered to be the ethical imperative of criticism to heterology and heterodoxy. For him the critic should always be a kind of trickster, like Jacob, and a deployer of the *coup de Jarnac* like Jacob’s antagonist—a bit of a bastard in the critical wrestle, in fact.⁵⁸

For my argument for an ethically non-indifferent androcriticism, through the literary intervention of poetry, the paragesis serves as this (illegitimate) bastard act, ungluing the biblical text from some of the strands of its canonicity and reading it in multidimensional ways. This is key to the androcritical project as, “like most readings of any value, this one shows the reader’s particular selfhood put *en jeu*, at stake, at risk.”⁵⁹

I shall be returning to the connotations of this excessive ‘below the belt’ gesture later in this chapter. However, having set up the theatricality of the Jabbok scene through the dimensions of biblical criticism and literary theory, I want to explore some of the difficulties that this textual spectacle poses for trying to ‘see’ what is going on and who is doing what to whom, problems that have prompted so much of this text’s reception, and the continuing ambiguities that are articulated in the act-events of the following poems.

56 Ibid., p. 18.

57 As Cunningham explains, the ‘*coup de Jarnac*’ is a proverbial French expression, celebrating the “hamstringing thrust to the knee by which the Comte de Jarnac won a famous duel in 1547. The victory was legal but still morally dubious. Jarnac was also the name of the place, etched on French Protestant memory, where twenty-two years after the notorious duel, the Huguenot General Louis, Prince de Conde, was defeated and killed in a battle against his Catholic enemies.” Cunningham, “Roland Barthes (1915–1980): An Introduction,” p. 78.

58 Ibid., pp. 78–79.

59 Ibid., p. 79.

On (Not) Seeing the 'Face of God' in the Textual Spectacle of Jacob and the Angel

I am arguing that by reading the spectacle of Jacob's struggle with his adversary in Gen. 32:22–32 we might explore how the difficulties of representing and inscribing human and divine male bodies are also bound up with certain scriptings of what these bodies can *mean*. This is not to simply map biblical characters onto modern masculinities, but to focus on the 'technologies of the self' that are involved in reading in the present, a type of 'pre-posterous' reading⁶⁰ of these biblical patriarchs who inhabit a textual world that has historically been a part of constructing some of the textures of everyday life. Biblical sources have also influenced the *representations* of these realities. I am concerned with how such representations are formed by interpretation and, if such interpretations are to become more androcritical, this includes the necessary acknowledgment of a poetic-ethic double-bind in deconstructive reading and retelling. In this way, the process of interpretation is always a double-move; it both frames and constitutes the object that is being interpreted, and, in relation, constitutes the subject as interpreter. This shall be further explored below in Mieke Bal's concept of 'envisioning' as interpretation. However, this is not to argue for an essentialist nature for either subject (interpreter) or object (biblical text). As chapter one outlined, different ideals of biblical authority circle the different reading methods that are performed upon them. Both parties are, in some senses, undecideable, and are static for only as long as it takes for a reading to form and be performed between them. With this in mind, I shall be arguing for a sense of 'relational masculinities', masculinities performed and constituted in relation to figurations of maleness within biblical texts and to their reception through poetic retelling and interpretation.

Envisioning this multi-dimensional reading process is not without its problems, particularly around the ancient problem of whether reading enables the reader to see or gaze or glimpse textual bodies in the 'mind's eye'. I will ask questions of how the written and gendered bodies of the wrestling protagonists are presented and what implications this has for the difficulties surrounding the representation of male bodies more generally. Biblical scholar Jennifer Glancy has raised difficulties with how the concepts clustered around the term 'the male gaze' have been used problematically in a predominantly text-based

60 'Preposterous' is the term Mieke Bal introduces "for the wilful and thoughtful deployment of anachronism in the interpretation of historical artefacts. The idea is to draw the attention to the productive potential of asserting the interpreter's position in the present as an entrance into understanding the past insofar as it is relevant for the present." Bal, *Loving Yusuf: Conceptual Travels from Present to Past*, p. 13.

hermeneutics. Bal's work on 'envisioning' goes some way to answering Glancy's concerns and I use W. J. T. Mitchell's work on 'iconicity' to legitimate the use of visual studies terminology to understand a 'biblical visuality'.

I shall then engage with the work of Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, Björn Krondorfer, and Philip Culbertson to think about how envisioning both the divine and the human male body is denied, in a complex double-bind of affirmation and negation concerning the meanings and possibilities of such imaged bodies. A relational masculinity is never simply a one-to-one resemblance. There are unsettling paradoxes in trying to 'gaze' on and read this wrestling bout and we are not granted an equal view of the protagonists. Although Jacob names the place of his wounding/blessing 'Peniel' because "I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved" (Gen. 32:30), the Bible sets up irreconcilable contradictions between the visible and invisible God. According to Exodus, within the veiled space of the 'tent of meeting', "the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend" (33:11). A few lines later, however, as Moses intercedes for his people asking YHWH to "Show me your glory, I pray" (33:18), YHWH warns that "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live" (33:20). And yet the writer of Psalm 27 yearns for a visible presence; "'Come', my heart says, 'seek his / face! / Your face, LORD, do I seek'" (27:8). In another scene at 'the tent of meeting,' the LORD comes down in a pillar of cloud (Num. 12:5) and speaks with Aaron and Miriam. He warns them not to speak against his "servant Moses" because, "With him I speak face to face—/ clearly, not in riddles; / and he beholds the form of the / LORD" (Num. 12:8). Eilberg-Schwartz translates verse 8 as "With him I speak mouth to mouth, plainly and not in riddles and he beholds the likeness of the Lord." As he explains,

[t]he claim that Moses 'beholds the likeness of God' thus becomes pivotal. Moses is differentiated from other prophets not just because God speaks to him directly, but because Moses is permitted to gaze upon the deity. And if seeing God is what distinguishes Moses, then a more embodied reading of 'mouth to mouth' rises to the surface. In short, Moses is distinguished from other prophets by seeing God when God speaks.⁶¹

Eilberg-Schwartz links this embodied beholding with Gen. 32:22–32, arguing that, when Jacob names the scene of this struggle Peniel, declaring that he has seen the 'face of God' and lived to tell the tale,

61 Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *God's Phallus and Other Problems for Men and Monotheism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), pp. 71–72.

seeing the face is no metaphor. Jacob has not only seen the face of this being and has a permanent injury lest he come to doubt the reality of the incident. His experience is confirmed in his reunion with Esau after twenty years' absence in Paddan-Aram. In a touching scene, the brothers meet and embrace. When Esau declines his brother's offer of gifts, Jacob responds, 'No, I pray you; if you would do me this favour, accept from me this gift; for to see your face is like seeing the face of God (*Elohim*), and you have received me favourably.' Seeing his brother's face after all this time is as miraculous (and perhaps as frightening) as seeing the face of God.⁶²

Ambiguities remain however, centred, as ever, on the identity of the adversary. Just when the reality of the 'face of God' seems to be asserted, the difficulties in deciding with whom Jacob is struggling undercuts this. For Eilberg-Schwartz, this becomes part of a wider question, asking "not whether Jews really believed God had a body but why, when they imagined God in a human form, that form was so carefully veiled and why it was veiled in the particular way it was."⁶³ This question will animate some of the dimensions of the argument below. Following Elaine Scarry's work,⁶⁴ I shall argue that it is only through the voice and the 'touch' or 'strike' that renames and wounds Jacob that the divine adversary is given 'substance'. Reading this touch is part of the androcritical paragonical contribution. As Scarry notes "God's invisible presence is asserted, made visible, in the perceivable alterations He brings about in the human body [...]"⁶⁵ In the struggle at the Jabbok, the difficulty of making meaning with the textual event is played out in the inscribing of the wound on Jacob's (textual) body. Envisioning 'biblical visuality' in this scene, then, has to necessarily focus on the marking of Jacob's body. Although this scene seems to depict a physical, bodily struggle (something many poetic retellings of this scene pick up on), the body of the adversary is given substance in different ways, alternately interpreted at different points in this story's reception history as bird, cat, man, demon, angel, gods, or God Himself. In each case however, the body remains veiled, even as Jacob seems to hold him in his grasp.

In order to demonstrate the productive tensions that such visibility/invisibility engenders, I will use the parageses of Michael Symmons Roberts' 'Choreography', Michael Schmidt's 'Jacob and the Angel', and David Kinloch's

62 Ibid., p. 72.

63 Ibid., p. 75.

64 Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

65 Ibid., p. 183.

'Jacob and the Angel'. These are poetic parageses that enact that space between reading and writing that offers the possibility of the 'otherwise' of relational interpretation. The poems enact the performances of the male bodies in this textual spectacle as undecideable as they slide between visibility and invisibility, deconstructing the fixing power of the gaze. Although the notions of undecideability and performativity have almost become theoretical truisms in postmodern gender studies, there is still work to be done; how can reading and interpreting biblical male bodies be deployed in more complex acknowledgements of how such texts are recited and rewritten in relation to modern masculinities? If we are 'bound' to keep reading these texts that continue to exert some authoritative influence (whether literary or theological, or a complex manifestation of both) over 'Western' cultural imaginaries, how might an analysis of the difficulty of deciding upon what biblical male bodies connote assist in restructuring the performance of masculinities?

The 'Visual Category' in Reading and Retelling Biblical Male Bodies

The ideas that have clustered around Laura Mulvey's influential exploration of the concept of the 'male gaze'⁶⁶ are also operational in the interstices between critical theory, biblical studies, and critical men's studies in religion and I use them to explore how reading and writing on 'Bible' may function as both a scripting and reciting of male bodies, and as a crisis in the representation of male bodies. The aim is to get close enough to the texts to see the cracks and fissures appear, to stretch those textual bindings in a paragesis that inserts new reading/writings in the form of poems and that invite us to watch and encounter "deconstruction happening."⁶⁷

However, in trying to 'see' textual imagery, it is also important to acknowledge that variations of the word/image problem have caused philosophers, theologians, artists, and poets consternation for millennia. From the earliest religious concerns about being created in the 'image' and 'likeness' (Gk. *eikon*) of God (Gen. 1:26–2:24), through the Augustan poet Horace and his *Ars Poetica* to Archibald MacLeish's poem of the same name, the necessary confusion between words and images has animated how we read and write, communicate and use imaginative language. Horace's idea that "as is painting so is poetry" (*ut pictura poesis*) and MacLeish's sense that "A poem should be

66 Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975).

67 Beal, "Opening: Cracking the Binding," p. 2.

wordless / as the flight of birds"⁶⁸ rely on theories that link image and word. Shorthand statements like, 'I saw it in my mind's eye', or 'she has remarkable poetic vision', hint at the long history of metaphorically conflating concepts of 'seeing' with linguistic cognition and understanding. It is beyond the bounds of this chapter to introduce the history of thought on perception and imagination but aspects of this conflation are certainly at work in reading and interpreting biblical texts.

To get a little closer to the problem, the subtle but decisive differences between 'resemblance' and 'representation' are constantly in tension.⁶⁹ Mary Daly's statement that 'if God is a man, then man is God' understands that men have attempted to *resemble* the attributes of culturally conditioned gods/God and to organize social structures to this symmetrical end. I want to problematize this truism a little to show that it is the complexities of *representation* rather than resemblance that sustain or deconstruct such an ideology. By shifting the focus to *representations* of human and divine male bodies, there is an inherent admission that men *cannot resemble* gods/God, a source of asymmetrical anxiety and crisis for conceptions of masculinity. The interpretative gap that opens up between 'world' and 'representation', and which has to be repressed in order for a model of resemblance to operate, is a source of anxious threat for masculine identities. This anxiety can be traced through looking again at the signs, the designations, of Jacob's struggle with the stranger.

Since Mulvey's film studies essay, her psychoanalytic concept of 'the male gaze' has been used within different disciplinary environments, and appears with regularity in gender criticism and visual and film studies.⁷⁰ Critiquing and extending the theoretical reach and usefulness surrounding the 'male gaze' has started in biblical and theological studies⁷¹ and I frame this section around an attempt to engage with Glancy's questions:

[...] is it legitimate to draw on an essentially visual category in the analysis of written texts? Moreover, is vision a natural category common to all

68 Archibald MacLeish, *Collected Poems 1917–1982* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1985).

69 See W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

70 For example, Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992); Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*.

71 See, for example, Jennifer A. Glancy, "Text Appeal: Visual Pleasure and Biblical Studies," *Semeia*, no. 82 (1998); Philip L. Culbertson, "Designing Men: Reading the Male Body as Text," in *Men and Masculinities in Christianity and Judaism: A Critical Reader*; Paul M. Collins, "Constructing Masculinity: De Utero Patris (from the Womb of the Father)," *Journal of Men, Masculinities and Spirituality* 4, no. 2 (June 2010).

human cultures, or is vision historical, embedded in culture? And if the experience of vision, of seeing, is culturally constructed, is it legitimate to draw on the notion of the gaze in a transhistorical manner?⁷²

These are provocative questions and Glancy does not propose extensive answers within her article. But she has set my own thinking on important trajectories in linking the spectacle of the textually perceived biblical male body with the compositions and performance of male interpreters writing their own texts *in the present*. This necessarily entails analysis of the contingencies of reading in the present while trying to avoid the dangers of attributing a transhistorical essence to such a reading gaze. However, I disagree with her point that biblical scholars (or any other rewriters of Bible) “are likely to find that the disciplinary gaze, as articulated by Foucault and Sartre, has a greater explanatory potential than the gendered gaze derived from feminist film criticism.”⁷³ If I am to explore what is at work in what Glancy terms ‘biblical visuality,’ explanatory potential lies in different combinations of thinking on the gaze, rather than a single type. For example, the ‘disciplinary gaze’ is arguably bound up with this gaze being gendered as patriarchal and able to construct regimes of signification around the male body as *readable* and *recited* but only in certain ways. This is more properly an androcritical stance. Ken Stone (who cites some of Foucault’s own thinking on a disciplinary gaze and the concomitant ‘technologies of the self’), suggests that “the subject of biblical interpretation does not only precede but is also formed, in part, through the practices of reading.”⁷⁴ These relational, constitutional practices can be found in the complexities of ‘gazing’ on the textual bodies in the act-event of writing on Jacob and the ‘angel’.

There is no point-by-point relationship between mental imagery or representation and physical material bodies. But we have been entrained and encultured by textualities, by textures of perception. We expect meaning through language and image and we use terms like ‘the mind’s eye’ or ‘body language’ to confuse terms into constructive metaphors: “Do we ‘see’ when we read? Or is this vision a metaphor that displaces the fact that we *don’t* see when we read?”⁷⁵ Textual bodies are not there in any materially real sense but when reading certain literatures, we can render their effects on our own embodied reactions

72 Glancy, “Text Appeal: Visual Pleasure and Biblical Studies,” p. 64.

73 Ibid., p. 73.

74 Ken Stone, “Biblical Interpretation as a Technology of the Self: Gay Men and the Ethics of Reading,” in *Men and Masculinities in Christianity and Judaism: A Critical Reader*, ed. Björn Krondorfer (London: SCM, 2009), p. 204.

75 Glancy, “Text Appeal: Visual Pleasure and Biblical Studies,” p. 67.

whether that is titillation, repulsion, fear, or another complex response. We are able to acknowledge that a literary depiction does not necessarily conform to or resemble ‘the world’, but the complex processes by which we envisage the body and its acts, its body language, demonstrates how we attempt *articulation*, both in writing and communicating about bodies and imagining a body’s movement in our own literary recognition. This articulation *is* contingent and not transhistorical—as Nelson Goodman argues, “realistic representation . . . depends not upon imitation or illusion or information but upon inculcation [which] reduces all symbolic forms, and perhaps even all acts of perception, to culturally relative constructions or interpretations.”⁷⁶ Thus, there is also a type of canonography in realistic representation—we see what we have been taught to see and what we can reference. Seeing does have disciplinary connotations as Glancy argues (what one is not supposed to see, inculcated blind spots, the regimes of signification that surround the meaning of what is seen, and so forth) but retaining the dimension of a gendered gaze yields important insights as well.

Analysing some of the difficulties of using the concept of the ‘gaze’ will take us further in exploring the tensions of reading male bodies in a contemporary sense of ‘biblical visuality’. As Mieke Bal demonstrates,

the concept of the gaze has a variety of backgrounds. It is sometimes used as an equivalent of the ‘look’, indicating the positions of the subject doing the looking. As such it points to a position, real or represented. It is also used in distinction from the ‘look’, as a fixed and fixating, colonizing, mode of looking—a look that objectifies, appropriates, disempowers, and even, possibly, violates. In its Lacanian sense . . . it is most certainly different from—if not opposed to—its more common usage as the equivalent of the ‘look’ or a specific version of it. The Lacanian ‘gaze’ is, most succinctly, the visual order (equivalent to the symbolic order, or the visual part of that order) in which the subject is ‘caught’. In this sense it is an indispensable concept through which to understand all cultural domains, including text-based ones. The ‘gaze’ is the world looking (back) at the subject.⁷⁷

It is this Lacanian gaze that animates Mulvey’s film studies essay but here Bal has included the ‘text-based cultural domains’ in which we are caught and bound by the ‘gaze’ as well. However, in order to extend our engagement with

76 Qtd. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*, p. 65.

77 Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*, p. 36.

Glancy's concerns, Bal notes a further dimension that is linked with but not to be conflated with the gaze: *focalization*. This

indicates neither a *location* of the gaze on the picture plane, nor a *subject* of it, such as either the figure or the viewer. Instead, what becomes visible is the *movement* of the look. In that movement, the look encounters the limitations imposed by the gaze, the visual order. For the gaze dictates the limits of the figures' respective positions as holder of the objectifying and colonizing look, and disempowered object of that look. The tension between the focalizer's movement and these limitations is the true object of analysis.⁷⁸

Bal has set up an important generative tension between the 'focalizing look' and the 'gaze'. What this means for my analysis is that, in the poetic retelling, we can trace this movement of focalization through language and imagery as it comes up against the boundaries of the 'visual order'. The poem can look and reread (*relegere*) but only in a tense relationship with the structures of a symbolically inflected gaze. If "the text pre-empts all existence—any space we might think to negotiate has already been anticipated and occupied"⁷⁹ we might say that, similarly, the (textual) gaze already anticipates and disciplines the (textual) focalizing look, surrounding the subject's sense of himself. The scripts seem to be given, choreographing the 'writing of our flesh', a 'dance-writing' that transliterates the body's movement into graphemes, marks, and textual signs to be read and recited.

In what follows then, I acknowledge Glancy's concerns with the visual 'gaze' being used in a biblical studies that is predominantly focussed on text-based exegesis, but utilize Bal's cluster of ideas surrounding 'focalization', 'gaze' and the 'look' to continue to transgress the text/image boundaries. As Bal notes, "the hypothesis that says readers *envision*, that is, create images from textual stimuli cuts right through semantic theory, grammar, and rhetoric to foreground the presence and crucial importance of *images* in reading."⁸⁰ Not only is it legitimate to draw on an essentially visual category but "transgressions of the text-image boundaries [are ... the rule rather than the exception]."⁸¹ With the above in mind, let us turn to a poem that attempts to render Gen. 32:22–32 as a textual spectacle, a 'biblical visuality', and look again at what is marked there.

78 Ibid., p. 39.

79 Sawyer, *God, Gender and the Bible*, p. 7.

80 Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*, pp. 37–8.

81 Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*, p. 155.

Choreographies: Michael Symmons Roberts

Michael Symmons Roberts' poem and paragesis 'Choreography' reads the Genesis fragment as a violently embodied struggle and narrows the focalization to the physicality of the actual fight itself.

His fist smashes my face.
That's no wrestler's move;
so it's bare knuckles now. Okay.

There's blood in my eye,
the lid swells to a hood.
I use my head and butt him.

His lips bloom like a rose,
but he's still ticking, clicking
his tongue on the roof of his mouth.⁸²

The poem is written in present-tense throughout with the emphasis on the first-person 'I'. Sentences are short and fast, recounting the violent action (bare knuckles, head-butts, gut punches, knees in the jaw, face-dunking, slaps, and finally the enigmatic slipping of the hip "out of its bone-cup"), and metaphorical language is kept to a minimum as the poem circles the performative and spectacular, moving from fight to dance, even if only retrospectively with the realisation in one of the concluding stanzas that "that was no stutter, / but a beat. The dance is over." The poem's hermeneutics of suspicion doesn't extend as far as questioning what the strike on the 'hollow of the thigh' (Gen. 32:26) might mean and it is unclear what the result of reframing this incident as a dance might be. Jacob is not renamed (or even named) by the end of the poem; the abyssal volcano of the name Israel is held off ("I hobble to the water's edge to wash. / I shout to him, '*What was your name?*' / I don't know if he hears me"). The only result seems to be his limp, from a dance to which he was not invited but into which he was brutally forced.⁸³

If we use this poem as a paragesis we can interpret the poem in complex ways. Not only is the poem an initial response to an oft-retold biblical story in itself but it is also a type of reading report on a need to imagine this textual

82 Michael Symmons Roberts, "Choreography," in *Corpus* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2004), p. 25.

83 As we have seen, the Hebrew פסח (*pesach*) has both the connotations of dancing and limping.

spectacle more fully, from a text that, as Erich Auerbach famously commented, “remains mysterious and ‘fraught with background.’”⁸⁴ In a sense, the poem offers an *extra*-biblical visuality, a need for more imagery that the reticence of the biblical text provokes in the reader. As we saw in Alden Nowlan’s poem above, the paragesis sits *within* a double-canon, bringing ‘extra’ material into the canon’s confines. We want to know what is happening here and this also means we want to *see* what is happening. Where the Genesis text emphasizes that Jacob was left alone (32:25) before being accosted by the stranger, the poem acknowledges the focalization on the spectacle of the struggle. The quick descriptive sentences jar us into looking at the acts; their rapid articulation generates the imagined physicality of the bout.

Because the poem opens without any explanation for the assault (and with no hint that this is a retelling of Gen. 32), our focalization for much of the poem is on the bodies themselves. Jacob is present through movement and articulation within a kind of textual *spectaculum*⁸⁵ and, as we shall go on to explore below, heteronormative focalization is securely surrounded and choreographed by a male gaze’s cultural signifiers—male bodies caught in the spectacle of violence. It is deemed legitimate for men to look upon male bodies within an encultured heteronormative gaze only when they are performed in certain ways. However, this move is double-edged. Placing male bodies into this spectacle involves interpreting them or constituting them in ways that the ‘male gaze’ can legitimate but, at the same time, it also demonstrates the necessary choreographies of their articulation. As Paul M. Collins argues, this “means that the classic iteration of male gaze/female object is brought into question. The process of deconstruction is reinforced when males are ‘spectacularized’ or the male body is fetishized in cinema or through visual images, and is foregrounded as spectacle in sport and popular music.”⁸⁶ This is the point where we, as readers and interpreters, start to get too close to the male body’s textual visibility. At this point in the poem, just as the spectacle of male violence seems to limit the reader’s focalization of any other signifier, a question is raised.

‘Choreography’ as a performance of reading and retelling Gen. 32, extends the detail from the brevity of the text, and yet more detail does not necessarily lead to more decideability. The poem questions the ‘man’s’ incommunicative nature; he clicks and ticks, marking time as if in a dance, but not saying a word

84 Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), pp. 11–12.

85 The Roman circus, an arena for spectacle and performance.

86 Collins, “Constructing Masculinity: De Utero Patris (from the Womb of the Father),” p. 91.

until the colloquial “*You had me there . . . I had to do your leg to settle things.*” As much as this is a focalized spectacle in the constituted ‘religious’ space (*religare/relegere*) between reading and writing, the poem also remains reticent about designating a meaning to this biblical text. There is even an excision of the motif of the renaming of Jacob after the strike on the hollow of the thigh, arguably reevaluating this portion of Genesis, for without the name change from Jacob to Israel as the result of meeting God פנים אל פנים (*pānîm ‘l pānîm*—face to face), meaning becomes even more difficult to ascribe. We have been allowed to watch the struggle, the extra-biblical visuality of the poem shaping our focalization on these male bodies, but, as I shall discuss below, at the moment in which the male body (divine or human) becomes most visualized or gazed at and written upon, this body becomes less available or even denied. The poem finishes with the angel’s disappearance, refusing to tell Jacob his name.⁸⁷

Denying the Look; Revealing and Re-veiling: Michael Schmidt

If ‘Choreography’ attempted to fill in the gaps and show us the struggling bodies of Jacob and the ‘angel’, it was also aware, by the final lines, that this focalization could not be sustained. Why might this be? Philip Culbertson highlights one of the main problems with talking about the heteronormative male body; in order to maintain patriarchal potency the vulnerable realities of the male body’s constitution must be elided. Thus “patriarchy is built upon the assumption that a male body is a text which will reject all attempts by other men to read it. To accept such an attempt would be to destroy the basis of power and control.”⁸⁸ Where Laura Mulvey argued that the feminine object is signified and contained by “to-be-looked-at-ness,”⁸⁹ the ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ of the male body becomes a point of crisis and problematic identity formation. As Björn Krondorfer has also explored (specifically in what he terms ‘confessionographies’, or ‘men writing themselves’), writing the male body circles what he terms a *non-absence*, that is to say, that “although the male body is always *in* the

87 For further analysis of how Symmons Roberts’ poetic retelling is an act of rewriting that opens onto fundamental questions of how the idea of ‘the biblical’ circulates and is reimagined across disciplinary borders, see my forthcoming article “‘What is Language but a Sound We Christen?’ Poetic Retellings as an Improper Surprise for Biblical Reception History” in the journal *Biblical Interpretation*.

88 Culbertson, “Designing Men: Reading the Male Body as Text,” p. 117.

89 Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” p. 11.

text, it is *not present* in the text as a consciously gendered body.”⁹⁰ The male writer assumes the facticity of his own body and thus need not question its constitution. That the imagined constitution of the male body is also often ignored in critical exegeses is tied up with averting the gaze from *other* male bodies as well as one’s own. This amounts to an encultured refusal to read heterosexual male bodies. Reading (and retelling or rewriting) emphasizes the created or scripted nature of meanings engendered by male bodies, raising the spectre that the meanings of this body could be constituted or versioned otherwise. This section explores how the male body can be absented in interpretation, an absence that, as argued above, is constituted by the parameters of the ‘male gaze’ and that is an absence that colludes with the technologies of delineating patriarchal power. Michael Schmidt’s poem enacts some of these textual/visual absences:

Jacob and the Angel⁹¹

He fell into the darkness and I caught him.
His eyes were closed, he did not wish to see
A man embrace him, he being an angel.
As long as he kept his eyes shut his lips could sing
Against my skin, he was so new, his hair
Feathering at the nape, his chest and sides
Smooth, his legs and thighs, not a hint of down,
An aura merely, the face rapt with desire.

Schmidt’s poem circles complex issues of power, presence and absence. The poem is positioned as a reported version of the textualized events of Gen. 32 from the perspective of Jacob himself; “That was the wrestle I had with the angel. / It was not about naming”; “They say we wrestled: he came down and challenged. / It is not so”. Jacob signifies that this is already a tactical retelling, as if aware of the existence of a canonical biblical account.

From the opening lines of the poem, the ‘angel’ falls into the darkness and is caught by Jacob. At this early stage, a consistent, insistent, theme is set around *invisibility*: “His eyes were closed, he did not wish to see / A man embrace him, he being an angel. / As long as he kept his eyes shut his lips could sing / Against my skin . . .” and so on until later the angel is described as inducing blindness;

90 Björn Krondorfer, “Textual Male Intimacy and the Religious Imagination: Men Giving Testimony to Themselves,” *Literature and Theology* 22, no. 3 (2008): pp. 270–71.

91 Michael Schmidt, “Jacob and the Angel,” in *The Resurrection of the Body* (Huddersfield: Smith/Doorstop Books, 2007).

"He was light and luminous and left behind / A darkness and a blindness, I was blind / Because he did not look at me or name me." Here the spectacle is voided by blindness and incomprehensibility, a rush and then 'draining of desire' rather than a combat, even as the desire to focalize this angelic body is denied.

The poem calls attention to both the body of the 'angel' as a silent text that offers no name and thus no re-scripting of Jacob as Israel, and the body of the biblical text as a springboard for new writing. As created work, the lyric poem foregrounds the discursive realities of the male body and shapes an experience of male bodies caught in desire. Adorno's thesis on the lyric poetry and society holds here; the seemingly subjective cast of the lyric can be addressed as an objective social substance because

the lyric work of art's withdrawal into itself, its self-absorption, its detachment from the social surface, *is socially motivated behind the author's back*. But the medium of this is language. The paradox specific to the lyric work, a subjectivity that turns into objectivity, is tied to the priority of the linguistic form in the lyric; it is that priority from which the primacy of language in literature in general (even in prose forms) is derived.⁹²

The lyric is not something separated from social discourse; subjective language, a language given but creatively used in new forms within the poem, society, or aspects of the social, is *performed*. This is why the paragesis is a form of performative interpretation that is inescapably social and also why it is such a useful form within which to practice an ethical non-indifference. The religious canonicity of the biblical text is a social construction that informs the interested literary identities at work in the paragesis. As Bal highlights, "the neat distinction between the two canons falls apart."⁹³

The poem explores a witnessing of a body that is worshipped but, at a critical point, goes "Out of my arms like vapour, like a sigh" and leaves only absence, blindness and the need to try out "the story that we'd been wrestling." The poem's movement between presence and absence offers an awareness of the difficulty of scripting the 'angel/man's' body, demonstrating the complex trap of poetic language that "is the very opposite of making language more transparent."⁹⁴ This 'angel/man' does not exert the power of the 'below the belt' injury that the Genesis Jacob sustains, but retreats into the absences of memory and reported speech, dispersing in light, luminosity, darkness,

92 Adorno, "On Lyric Poetry and Society," p. 43. Emphasis in original.

93 Bal, "Religious Canon and Literary Identity," p. 18.

94 Sigurd Burckhardt, "The Poet as Fool and Priest," *English Literary History* 23, no. 4 (1956): p. 283.

blindness. This male body cannot be gazed upon or conceived and offers no gaze in return even as Jacob tries to formulate the stranger's 'to-be-looked-at-ness'. How does this retelling, with its focus on male bodies, their presences and absences, affect a return to the Genesis script, which is not a return to an original, but another recitation?

In the spectacle of the Genesis telling, Jacob absents himself from "his two wives, his two maids and his eleven children . . . and likewise everything that he had." He is left alone, perhaps, as Barthes suggests, "to *mark himself* by solitude (this is the familiar *setting apart* of the chosen of God)."⁹⁵ Jacob's body will be marked in another way and this notion of marking is important for the problematic signification of the male body. But this setting apart, this male solitude, would seem, in my reading of Krondorfer, to allow Jacob to absent himself from his own material gendered body; nothing remains to destabilize or question its 'normativity'. This does not last for long; "Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak." Another body appears, thus bringing Jacob's gendered maleness into performative relation with another—he becomes visible again. Of course, as lookers-in on this text, he was (textually) visible to us all along, but a solitary and barely described male figure does not seem to embody or represent the relational "muscular, athletic, erect, brave, wise, protective, competitive, iron body"⁹⁶ that Krondorfer identifies as pre-eminent aspects of male corporeal mythologies. In this extract, these myths have to be performed and made visible through representative textual action. And yet, even as these are performed, the biblical prose creates those invisibilities and gaps that poets and writers sense as important catalysts for more writing.

The idea that the movement of focalizing within a semiotic 'gaze' constitutes both viewed and viewer is again important to this argument. The reading subject who is constituted in the dynamic space between texts, between reading and writing, is not a unified, autonomous, disembodied will, able to simply pick and choose between random signifiers but is bound to cultures and texts in ambiguous ways. Judith Butler's work emphasizes that reciting these bindings and boundaries serves an important function in creating a sense of gendered subjecthood. According to Butler, "as a shifting and contextual phenomenon, gender does not denote a substantive being, but a relative point

95 Barthes, "Wrestling with the Angel: Textual Analysis of Genesis 32:23–33," p. 87. Emphasis in original.

96 Björn Krondorfer, "Introduction," in *Men's Bodies, Men's Gods: Male Identities in a (Post-) Christian Culture*, ed. Björn Krondorfer (New York: New York University Press, 1996), p. 16.

of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations.”⁹⁷ It is only through the recitation of certain (canonical) norms that gendered identities are offered the illusion of stability. In this way, reciting biblical texts has the potential to fix perceived norms simply through reiterative interpretative practice. Reciting and rehearsing hegemonic masculinities through these interpretations also risks transhistorical essentialism. An androcritical biblical *paragesis* then becomes much more than practicing an advocacy interpretation; it also involves attentiveness to the fact that, as we have noted, “the subject of biblical interpretation does not only precede but is also formed, in part, through the practices of reading”⁹⁸ and, to a certain extent, is also constituted by the resources and recitations which he deploys.

The possibilities that are written onto male bodies are constituted by the interpreter/focalizer and this interpreter/focalizer also constitutes themselves by seeing and re-cognizing certain elements in the other. As Butler highlights,

[t]he act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene. Hence, gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again.⁹⁹

This is not to argue that there is a single script from which genders are performed, but it is to note that there are hegemonic scripts that incorporate elements of human experience into certain codifications and choreographies in order to make meaning from them. The scripts need actors to rehearse and perform them and, in turn, the actors use the scripts to communicate and articulate their signifying languages. This does not disallow scribbling in the margins or ad-libbing, but if these moments are to be meaningful, they are also constituted by linguistic and symbolic elements within canonical scripts. The element that is most often absented in the scripts (and scriptures) of the divine male body and, by extension, in representations of the bodies of Jacob and the ‘angel’ is their genitalia. This symbol *and* embodied reality is part of a complex refusal for the male body to signify ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ and yet, in order for the symbolic functions of the penis/phallus to be deployed and rehearsed, this symbol seems to require affirmation (visibility) as well as negation (invisibility).

97 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), p. 14.

98 Stone, “Biblical Interpretation as a Technology of the Self: Gay Men and the Ethics of Reading,” p. 204.

99 Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): p. 526.

How does this negotiation operate when reading the 'biblical visuality' of Gen. 32 from a paraetical angle?

Envisioning the *Coup de Jarnac*: David Kinloch

I shall add another paragesis here, this time from poet David Kinloch. Written in Scots dialect, it provides an example of how the paragesis operates not only between the canonographies of Bible and literature, but also brings linguistic differences into the play of semantics.

*Jacob and the Angel*¹⁰⁰

Aye. Pause. Ah said pause. Och fuck it! Ye're past it. Past it! Rewind! What? Aye. Just tryin. Tryin tae get the shot. In focus like. Difficult what with the grainy downslide. But ye've goat tae try. Hit the button. Jeezus! Naw! It wizny him. But somewun, something. Look ye can see him. Through the spray. Just. Yon adam's apple. The hollow at the base. Bone coloured skin. Aye aw skin an bone he wiz. Feathery hair. [. . .]

The themes of visibility and invisibility continue in this paragesis, characterized once again by the difficulties on deciding how the adversary takes form, its image changing as the grainy picture plays. In this, it demonstrates Bal's analysis that, particularly when trying to envision the biblical, "the look encounters the limitations imposed by the gaze, the visual order. For the gaze dictates the limits of the figures' respective positions as holder of the objectifying and colonizing look, and disempowered object of that look."¹⁰¹ If the biblical produces a semiosphere, a kind of visual order encultured by cultural-religious ideologies of what can and cannot be seen, then the poem can look and reread (*relegere*) but only in a tense relationship with the structures of a symbolically inflected gaze.

In an almost echo of the early Church fathers (followed by Luther and Calvin) who reframed Jacob's antagonist as the pre-incarnate Christ, the speaker in the poem puns on his own expletive, shouting "Jeezus! Naw! It wizny him." Then, as the film slows, the speaker seems to see something, a different type of choreography to that of Symmons Roberts: "Tha's it! Is that a . . . Christ! It's a fuckin claw! Ah've been tangoin wi a bear! Naw, mair like a cat!" This

100 David Kinloch, "Jacob and the Angel," in *Un Tour d'Ecosse* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2001).

101 Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*, p. 39.

second expletive completes the first so that 'Jeezus' Christ now also haunts the lines of the poem. Even the first man, Adam, gets a mention through the half-glimpsed 'adam's apple' of the opponent. The biblical becomes the profane colloquial.

The disturbing movement between pain and ecstasy also emphasizes the erotics of this scene, something else picked out by some of the poets I have chosen to outline my paragetical thesis. As such, there is no debate about the location of the 'below the belt' move by the "jealous bastard" (Kinloch echoing Barthes' theatrical characterizations of the wrestlers); this Jacob, who could barely remember his (new) name when he woke, is left with "an ache in ma crotch the size ae a cuntry." As with the other poems and certainly within much biblical criticism and commentary, we can now see why the 'to-be-looked-at-ness' of these struggling male bodies must be elided—the patriarch Jacob's penis/phallus is the site of an emasculating wound.

Reading 'Below the Belt' in the Critical Wrestle

The Hebrew connotations of the damage done to the 'thigh' hint as to why the redactor, followed by the interpreting reader/audience, must try to solve this problem in the midst of the *mêlée*. Part of the linguistic construction of the wrestling bout is the punning on the connotations and sounds of the root word עִקָּב (*'qab*—n. 'heel', v. 'to supplant'). Jacob (יַעֲקֹב) wrestles (אִבֵּק—*'bq*; v. 'to get dusty') at the Jabbok (יַבֹּק). This unusual verb for wrestling only occurs here in Gen. 32:24–25.

An example of the possible outworkings of this punning is found in S. H. Smith's article, "'Heel' and 'Thigh': The Concept of Sexuality in the Jacob-Esau Narratives".¹⁰² The first section of the argument centres around the usage of the Hebrew *'qab*, the root of Jacob's name linked to his grasping of Esau's heel (*'qab*) in Rebekah's womb. After relating the noun 'heel' to the verb 'to supplant', Smith suggests that

the spirit of the narrative is more strictly adhered to if *aqab* is taken in this instance as a euphemism for genitals. Since in ancient Hebrew thought the sexual organs were regarded as the seat of a man's procreative power, the suggestion that in the story Jacob is gripping Esau not by the heel but by the genitals would aptly prefigure the narrative plot as a whole: by any means at his disposal Jacob wants to appropriate his

102 S. H. Smith, "'Heel' and 'Thigh': The Concept of Sexuality in the Jacob-Esau Narratives," *Vetus Testamentum* 40, no. 4 (1990).

brother's power for himself, thereby inheriting God's promise to Abraham of countless descendants.¹⁰³

What is important for the scene with which we are confronted is Smith's understanding of the Hebrew כַּף יָרֵךְ (*kp yrk*). He reads Jacob as struggling for supremacy even from Rebekah's womb, firstly over Esau and then, in the Jabbok scene, over God. Smith's translation of Gen. 32:26 reads:

And (the man (יָשׁ)) saw that he did not prevail over (Jacob), and he touched (וַיַּקֵּ) the hollow of his thigh (*kp yrkw*); [and Jacob's thigh was put out of joint as he wrestled with him.]¹⁰⁴

Smith has already asserted his reading of this event by deciding that the object of the first half of this sentence is Jacob (in brackets here) perhaps because he has decided on the theological import of this event. The controversy comes with Smith's tracing of *kp yrk* as he ventures to "suggest, along with S. Gevirtz,¹⁰⁵ that in receiving a 'blow' [עָנָה—*ng*] on the *kp hyrk* Jacob was being struck in his genitals and that this had significance for his understanding of the divine promise in which the inheritance of the land was bound to the pledge of procreative power."¹⁰⁶ While *yrk* clearly denotes thigh, the addition of *kp* makes it less certain. If we turn to another intratext/intertext, we can see how this line of thought is followed by another critic.

In order to explode the meanings of this passage, we must narrow our focus right down, almost to the touch-paper. The connotations of *kp* are just such a fuse. In a fascinating and disturbing study, Lyle Eslinger attempts to work out if a passage from Deuteronomy 25:11–12 denotes part of the *lex talion* of the law codes:

11 If men get into a fight with one another, and the wife of one intervenes to rescue her husband from the grip of his opponent by reaching out and seizing his genitals, 12 you shall cut off her hand: show her no pity.

Although an obviously shocking text in itself, what is important for my purposes is that the euphemistic connotations of *kap* are explored. As Eslinger

103 Ibid., p. 465.

104 Ibid., p. 466. All quotations from Smith are from his own transliteration of the Hebrew text.

105 Stanley Gevirtz, "Of Patriarchs and Puns: Joseph at the Fountain, Jacob at the Ford," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 46 (1975).

106 Smith, " 'Heel' and 'Thigh': The Concept of Sexuality in the Jacob-Esau Narratives," pp. 466–467.

highlights, “in v. 11 the woman grabs the pudenda with her hand *yādāh*, but in v. 12 the punishment is to cut off her *kappāh*. This word, in most instances, is used to denote the palm of the hand or sole of the foot. It can, however, also be used of various hollow or bent objects.”¹⁰⁷ The two passages that inform this reading are the ‘hollow of the thigh’ usage in Gen. 32:26 and 33, and Song of Songs 5:5 where *כפות המנעול* (*kappôt hamman’ûl*) is usually translated as ‘the handles of the bolt’, the ‘locked garden’ of the female character. Arguably, in all three cases, *kap* is used to refer to genitalia. With this in mind, Eslinger reads the Genesis fragment in this way: “Given that *kap* conveys the general connotation of hollowness (as in a pan, a vessel, or the pouch of a sling) it is quite possible that the strategic action, *wayyigga’ bekap yerēkô* [ויגע בכף־ירכיו] of 32:26 is actually directed at the scrotum (a hollow, pouch-like appendage) of the opponent.”¹⁰⁸ In this sense, the strategy of attacking the opponent’s genital area as an illegal wrestling move begins to become more telling.

It would seem that Smith’s view is vindicated by Eslinger’s work even if Smith does decide to take the more conventional route of ascribing the ‘below the belt’ strategy to Jacob’s assailant rather than the patriarch himself. The final redactor is brought back in as a commentator on the bout;

From the point of view of the final redactor there may in fact be a sense of narrative development behind these euphemistic uses of *yrk*. By striking Jacob on the *kp yrk* God was asserting his sovereign power over Jezreel’s [sic] procreative power. But once Jacob had acknowledged God’s strength as supreme, God allowed him to inherit the Abrahamic promise, so that children sprang freely from the very loins over which God had asserted his dominance.¹⁰⁹

For Roland Boer, who wants to demonstrate the ‘testicular logic’ of biblical Hebrew, “the word *yarekh* may mean genitals, thigh, hip, hip joint, side, base, deepest hollow, or recess. In this case, these various senses are obviously connected, but one applies—or so goes the advice to budding translators—the most appropriate sense depending on the literary context.”¹¹⁰ However, and in keeping with the ways in which I am formulating poetic parageses as able to articulate an androcritical stance in interpretation,

107 Lyle M. Eslinger, “The Case of an Immodest Lady Wrestler in Deuteronomy XXV 11–12,” *Vetus Testamentum* 31, no. 3 (1981): p. 272.

108 Ibid., pp. 273–274.

109 Smith, “‘Heel’ and ‘Thigh’: The Concept of Sexuality in the Jacob-Esau Narratives,” p. 469.

110 Roland Boer, “The Patriarch’s Nuts: Concerning the Testicular Logic of Biblical Hebrew,” *Journal of Men, Masculinities and Spirituality* 5, no. 2 (June 2011): p. 42.

Boer also argues that “whenever a word is used it evokes, however implicitly and contextually, the other senses of its semantic cluster.”¹¹¹ As he reads the textual spectacle:

Picture the scene for a moment: some thug accosts Jacob at the ford but can't prevail over him, so in the tradition of street-fighting he knees him in the nads. Despite the excruciating pain, in which Jacob's itchy and scratchy (*kaf-yerekh Ya'aqov*—verse 26/25) are turned inside out (תקע—*teqa'*), he hangs on for a blessing. Once granted, Jacob limps from the scene because of his excruciatingly painful *yarekh* (verse 31/32). At this point the Hebrew text is a little too hasty in seeking an etymological explanation for what went on, suggesting that this story explains why Israelites do not eat the schlong and stones (verse 33/32) of an animal. But the true etymology of the story shows up a little earlier, for in the blessing, Jacob has his name changed to Israel, meaning “God struggles” or “the one who struggles with God.” For most men a solid knee in the nut cups makes one feel as though you have met your maker. Make that a blow to the plums by a divine thug and it certainly does feel like one has seen the face of God (פני'אל—*Peni'el*: verse 31/30).¹¹²

Making some creative and critical decisions as to what is happening in Gen. 32:22–32 is a necessary and unavoidably ideological move. Boer is already more ‘androcritical’ than Patte by allowing Hebrew’s semantic punning to enrich and problematize the representation of male bodies in the narrative. As Barthes notes, even though in wrestling

all the actions which produce suffering are particularly spectacular, like the gesture of a conjuror who holds out his cards clearly to the public . . . [s]uffering which appeared without intelligible cause would not be understood; a concealed action that was actually cruel would transgress the unwritten rules of wrestling and would have no more sociological efficacy than a mad or parasitic gesture.¹¹³

The *coup de Jarnac* must mean something and, as I am arguing here, its excessive gesture troubles the construction of patriarchal masculinities. The poems I have chosen circle the connotations of the genital wounding, whilst also

111 Ibid.

112 Ibid., p. 47.

113 Barthes, “The World of Wrestling,” p. 19.

struggling with the representation of the divine and human male bodies envisioned in the spectacle. However, this poetic invisibility is not necessarily the invisibility or elision of the performed character of masculinities that has been noted in normative biblical criticism. These parageses open up different dimensions of how this spectacle might be read and, paradoxically, force the reader to acknowledge the ‘invisible’ constructions of male bodies and think this through.

The Voice and the Wound: Marking the Male Body

Much biblical criticism has avoided the connotations of ‘reading’ biblical male bodies. Such avoidance speaks volumes. Although many biblical commentators, particularly from a more conservative religious background, have read biblical masculinities as providing useful characterizations for contemporary men,¹¹⁴ they have not explored the inherent paradoxes and contradictions that such biblical constructions entail. There is, of course, a long religious tradition of the holy invisibility of that most male of males, YHWH. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz has done significant work on the difficulties early Israelite religion had in both affirming that human beings are made in the image and likeness of God, whilst prohibiting the representation of this divine image. He has specifically used the story of Jacob and the ‘angel’ as an example of ‘unmanning’, which, when read together with the poetic parageses, suggests that maintaining Jacob as an unproblematic figure of patriarchy is a difficult task. We have already noted that the writer of Hosea had questions to ask of Jacob’s patriarchy and his underhand ways. In addition, all of the poems have finished without a victorious Jacob—Eilberg-Schwartz notes that “Jacob leaves the struggle with a limp and is unable to discover the being’s name, and he himself does not say he prevailed, but that his life was preserved, describing it as a stand-off

114 The Christian men’s movement known as the Promise Keepers is particularly adept at this manoeuvre. Promise 4 of the 7 promises is that “A Promise Keeper is committed to building strong marriages and families through love, protection, and biblical values.” See www.promisekeepers.org/about/7-promises. Accessed 14th January 2012. As Joseph Gelfer notes, “Today, Christian manhood has once again been realigned with biblical manhood, where the husband and father is the intermediary between his family and God. Even academics have begun to speak about this in positive terms with the identification of ‘soft patriarchs’ who are more involved with family life than non-Christian men due to their ‘symbolic’ headship of the family. Presumably soft patriarchy results in soft oppression.” Joseph Gelfer, “Both Remedy and Poison: Religious Men and the Future of Peace,” *Journal of Men, Masculinities and Spirituality* 4, no. 1 (January 2010): p. 2.

rather than a victory. In fact, the name Israel may originally have meant 'and God prevailed'.¹¹⁵ But what of the wounding, the marking, which occurred during the extra-biblical visuality of the poems?

The moving focalization of the reader, reflected in the visual order of the male gaze, can cope with a wounded warrior image as a strong identifier but the nature of this wound might give pause for thought; "The thigh or loins is frequently a euphemism for the penis. Jacob's offspring, for example are said to spring from his thigh (Gen. 46:26; Exod. 1:5). [There are] also the oaths taken by placing the hand 'under the loins' (Gen. 24:2, 9; 47:29)."¹¹⁶ As soon as Jacob is recognized as a man, "he must be marked on the genitals, signifying his submission to God. Jacob only becomes Israel through an act of partial emasculation."¹¹⁷ Elsewhere, Eilberg-Schwartz argues that this emasculation and feminisation of Israelite men became necessary in a relationship imagined as a marriage covenant with a monotheistic male God. Suppressing the homoerotic impulse could then take two forms; "a prohibition against depicting God (veiling the body of God) and the feminisation of men [where] women were deemed impure and men were feminised so as to disrupt what in this religious culture was a natural complementarity between the divine male and human females."¹¹⁸ In this way, the invisibility of the divine stranger, and the veiling of the 'biblical visuality' of the mark made to Jacob's genitals, work together in both poem and biblical text, rendering the bodies both present (even more so in the physicality of the poem) and absent by assenting to the 'dance-writing' that structures the male gaze and halts any focalization on the penis and testes. As Mulvey highlights, "according to the principles of the ruling ideology and the psychical structures that back it up, the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like."¹¹⁹ This reluctance might stem from the fact that looking at or reading male genitalia entails deconstructive risk;

The penis will not behave: now a penis, now a phallus, the one when we wish the other, it is itself a text that we can barely read, even with double vision. It seems not one thing but two. The phallus is haunted by the

115 Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, "Unmanning Israel," in *Men and Masculinities in Christianity and Judaism: A Critical Reader*, p. 174.

116 Ibid. This is what Boer refers to as the "yerekh shake" in "The Patriarch's Nuts: Concerning the Testicular Logic of Biblical Hebrew": p. 47.

117 Eilberg-Schwartz, "Unmanning Israel," p. 176.

118 Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, "God's Phallus and the Dilemmas of Masculinity," in *Redeeming Men: Religion and Masculinities*, p. 37.

119 Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," p. 12.

penis and vice versa. It has no unified social identity, but is fragmented by ideologies of race and ethnicity.¹²⁰

Like Jacob's patriarchy, upheld by YHWH's promises to him that he will father a great nation, looking too closely we begin to see the fissures in the textual fabric. The look has to be denied in order for the phallus to retain its symbolic power. As resemblance between the penis and the phallus cannot be affirmed, so modes of representation that then, conversely, veil any representation have to suffice. As Eilberg-Schwartz has it, the "myths of Noah and Adam and Eve regard shame about nakedness as a foundational moment in the emergence of human culture . . . to be uncovered is to reintroduce a state of disorder. Culture is preserved by the virtuous sons who cover their father's nakedness."¹²¹ And, we might say, epistemological decorum and patriarchal potency is preserved by biblical commentators and critics covering the 'nakedness of the fathers'¹²² with texts that they have spun themselves.

Although Judith Butler argues that "masculinity and femininity are learned bodily performances that masquerade as natural by invoking bodily markers (primary and secondary sex characteristics) as their signature and guarantee,"¹²³ many biblical texts retain a complex and 'fraught background' for such a performance. The performance (and focalization) is often surrounded by a theocratic male gaze. Performing the markers of human maleness is thus both guaranteed and regularly undermined by the inherent biblical theology of the text. There are tensions between Israelite law codes and the patriarch narratives such as we find in Genesis where a discernible process of emasculation takes place. Abraham is usurped by God in "his role as father, as protector of his son . . . along with his role as husband and primary instigator of his wife's pregnancy. The limitations of Abraham's identity as a patriarch are now clearly defined and subordinate to divine supremacy."¹²⁴ Sarah also takes on a more active role than Abraham in her demands that he father a son through Hagar. Tamar ridicules and shames Judah, highlighting his breaking of Levirate law twice (once in not giving her to his son Shelah in Levirate marriage [Gen. 38:14]; then, second, in 'turning aside' to her at Enaim, and fathering Perez and

120 Culbertson, "Designing Men: Reading the Male Body as Text," p. 119.

121 Eilberg-Schwartz, "God's Phallus and the Dilemmas of Masculinity," p. 43.

122 See Alicia Suskin Ostriker, *The Nakedness of the Fathers: Biblical Visions and Revisions* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1994).

123 Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St. Ville, "Judith Butler—In Theory," in *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler*, ed. Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St. Ville (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 5.

124 Sawyer, *God, Gender and the Bible*, p. 54.

Zerah, [Gen. 38:16]). Yet even this undermining of the law results in the Davidic line continuing. Sawyer sees these stories as evidence that, although “the biblical texts were no doubt written by men and for men, the maleness affirmed by them is complex rather than purely hegemonic, and they contain an overriding theology that affirms the deity largely at the expense of the autonomy of the male audience.”¹²⁵

If we read Jacob and his struggle with the divine stranger with this in mind, the marking on his body becomes a complex sign to focalize. If there is a danger that this strike might render him infertile, the irony that this occurs just before he is renamed as Israel would suggest that this divine male can both withhold and guarantee Jacob's potency and masculinity. The anxiety for biblical males (and for male interpreters of these patriarchs) is that it may be unclear as to whether the deity will guarantee or withhold their own performative masculinities. Seeing God “face to face” (Gen 32:30) is an envisaging that might be a denial of the deity's visage, his ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ and a destruction of the focalizing body (Exod. 33:20; “for no one shall see me and live”). It might also result in a name change that instigates male paternity and patriarchy, as in Jacob's name change to Israel. The ‘biblical visuality’ that Glancy questions can then become a complex type of theophany and, within the Bible's theological and theocratic backdrop, such theophanies invoke crises in the constitutional elements of the gaze. Reading human and divine male bodies is risky and yet we are bound to go on reading.

In Symmons Roberts' poem and in the biblical narrative the antagonist is a stranger that is difficult to fit within the ‘visual order’. Symmons Roberts seems to acknowledge this by depicting the assailant as “ticking / clicking his tongue on the roof of his mouth” throughout the struggle, clicking louder as Jacob strikes him harder. It takes Jacob the entirety of the fight to realize that, once he has been wounded and damaged, the angel's clicking was “no stutter, / but a beat. The dance is over.” In this way, we are brought up short in our envisioning of the spectacle. Other senses are being engaged. In Schmidt and Kinloch's poems the touch/strike oscillates between erotic and violent. Wasserman plays with the violence of the strike and the difficulty of understanding the stranger's utterances. Touch and sound become another way in which the biblical scene is ‘envisioned’ or imagined in a broader sense.

In all of the parageses and the Genesis text we have the two attributes that Elaine Scarry understands as the substantiation of God in the ‘realm of matter’—God's voice and God's altering or wounding of the body. Scarry notes that “Genesis is filled not only with the emphatic material reality of the forever

125 Ibid., p. 64.

multiplying human body, but with God's voice which takes two different forms, a command ('Be fruitful and multiply') and a promise ('You will be fruitful and multiply').¹²⁶ So, just as God's voice intervenes, predicts and promises, in a kind of divine choreography, it is extremely troubling that the wounding of Jacob takes place at exactly the site through which this command might continue to be followed (even though Jacob already has eleven children at this point). As Scarry highlights, "the crowd of eventual humanity resides within the parental body"¹²⁷ and it seems that here, as with the Akedah or 'sacrifice of Isaac' in Gen. 22, God almost aborts his own promise and command, even as it is constantly repeated to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

However, if "the place of man is in the body [and] the place of God is in the voice,"¹²⁸ then "the body in its most intense presence becomes the substantiation of the most disembodied reality."¹²⁹ As Scarry emphasizes, "the human child, the human womb, the human hand, the face, the stomach, the mouth, the genitals (themselves circumcised, marked)—it is in the body that God's presence is recorded."¹³⁰ In the wrestling bout of Gen. 32 Jacob's antagonist remains unrepresentable. Our textual envisioning can only really be directed towards Jacob's body which is altered, wounded and marked by the divine assailant. In the Genesis text, Jacob is also renamed as Israel, a name given through the voice of the stranger, another alteration, another type of inscription or writing on the body, a "recording of the elusive voice in the transformation of the material world."¹³¹ The divine Other is made present through Jacob.

The nuances brought forth by a multi-dimensional exegesis indicate the fictive reality of Jacob's body as a contested site of signification. Jacob's phallic guarantee has been seriously undermined by his struggle. His 'bodily marker' that might serve to naturalize his patriarchal power has been brought into question. This is a strange scene and one that, for the male gaze, is not imbued with the 'visual pleasure' that Mulvey explores in her article as our focalization moves from the obscured, struggling bodies, to where Jacob's seat of power is almost lost; his 'manhood' is damaged and marked and made painfully present. The biblical text will return him to the patriarchal script as the father of the Twelve Tribes of Israel (as Mulvey highlights in her essay, the male character has to be returned to the thrust of the narrative rather than being gazed at

126 Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, p. 191.

127 Ibid., p. 192.

128 Ibid.

129 Ibid., p. 194.

130 Ibid., p. 204.

131 Pyper, *An Unsuitable Book: The Bible as Scandalous Text*, p. 120.

for too long in spectacle),¹³² but at this point, we can see some of the articulations of both biblical text and its interpretations. As we have seen in some of the reception history surrounding the scene, many theological interpretations also rush to place male patriarchy back in power, focussing on God's blessing to Jacob as Israel, casting the assailant as a type of Christ figure, or imagining the crippling of Jacob by a dark and powerful divine male. But if we are to pause this scene before this act is made what might be imagined instead?

The undecideability of what is happening at the Jabbok river is fundamental to its interpretative otherlives. As I have highlighted, as much as we might try to 'envision' both wrestling bodies in order to begin to confer meaning upon them, each is denied us in different ways. I have argued throughout this chapter that the ideas clustered around Bal's complex of envisioning (look, gaze, focalization) are useful and legitimate to think with when re-reading Gen. 32:22–32. These are not transhistorical concepts but neither are the perceived essentialisms of text and image. As W. J. T. Mitchell argues, "the differences between sign-types are matters of use, habit and convention. The boundary line between texts and images, pictures and paragraphs, is drawn by a history of practical differences in the use of different sorts of symbolic marks, not by a metaphysical divide."¹³³ I have also muddied the Jabbok waters further in that, following the prompts of the poetic retelling, with its auditory as well as visual imagery, I responded to the difficulties of envisioning the unrepresentable divine body. As much as readers are bound into a complex non-focalization on Jacob's wounded body—particularly because of the site of the wound and what this might entail for constructions of patriarchal potency—it is only through the wounded, renamed, Jacob-Israel that there is any substantiation of the divine. Re-reading and re-writing on Gen. 32:22–32 helps us pause at its undecideability. If we want to read masculinities otherwise, this pause at the Jabbok provides a troubling scene of male performance, human and divine. This involves recognising that the symbolic marks on male bodies are written and perceived in ways that often elide the troubled fragmentations at the heart of many different performances of masculinity. Imaging the male body as representative of God's body (an *imago dei*) becomes a much less smooth interpretative move. God does not have a body, but bodies are wounded and altered in the name of God, and these wounds can 'unman'; patriarchal power is consistently wounded by the divine male.

Interpretative representations of the bodies of Jacob and the angel can attempt to unite these fragments in a 'phallogocentricity' but, as with any sign,

132 Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," p. 12.

133 Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*, p. 69.

this unity is always haunted by the potential of its fragments to mean otherwise (in Derridean *différance*). The 'otherwise' is always present and has to be negated in order to decide upon a meaning. To put it another way, just as biblical interpreters and poets attempt to represent and gaze upon these bodies, as *representation* rather than *resemblance*, they have already become artifice and available for deconstruction. The spectacle of Jacob and the angel/man wrestling seems to invite us to look, to search for a revelation of masculinity whilst, at the same time, re-veiling how masculinities might be constituted. And, with this acknowledgment that the gaze constitutes the focalizer, that "*to figure* is always *to see as*, but not always *to see* or *to make visible*,"¹³⁴ male readers of Bible may have to admit to the many blind-spots in our figurations of masculinities, tracking the traces of male bodily representation which are also always a supplementation for the absence of an essential manhood.

The choreographies remain but within this dance-writing are re-cited spaces to articulate male bodies otherwise. What kind of dance steps might be performed to keep moving, to keep making (*poesis/téchne*) relational critical masculinities? As Ken Stone emphasizes, "the 'technology of the self' is thus not so much about the discovery or liberation of one's 'true' self but, rather, about the creation and recreation of the self in its variable relations with itself, with others, and the world."¹³⁵ As such, the self is also an act-event of reading and writing, a constant becoming and possibility—and yet, always within delineated limits. Following de Certeau's explanation of how reading texts is a process of rearranging and inventing through rewriting, a thicker understanding of the *poesis* of interpretation, as outlined here, offers different points of focalization in envisioning the paradoxes of biblical male bodies, both divine and human. Gen. 32:22–32 becomes an undecideable text that forces a pause in attempting to create masculinities from biblical material and also, for the processes of poetic and critical rewriting, "retains the power to elude and overturn every reading—[even] while the reader retains the power endlessly to rewrite the text."¹³⁶

What possibilities, then, might poetic and other 'literary' parageses hold for biblical interpretation? Might a turn to the 'space of literature' offer more nuance to the work currently being done in 'Reception History', recasting the traditional modes of biblical criticism as part of the cultural history of a given biblical text rather than the final word on the subject?

134 Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language*, p. 70.

135 Stone, "Biblical Interpretation as a Technology of the Self: Gay Men and the Ethics of Reading," p. 209.

136 The Bible and Culture Collective, *The Postmodern Bible*, p. 131.

The Dust Settles: Some Final Thoughts on Poetic Parageses of Jacob and the Angel

My theory of poetic paragesis is necessarily drawn from a number of interdisciplinary fields responding to a number of interrelated questions: how do 'ideal' Bibles affect the interpretation of 'real' ones? How is the inventive and heuristic imagination to be disciplined in order to produce legitimate knowledge? How does the *pharmakon* of writing both institute such knowledge and deconstruct it? How does poetry, often written in exile from the critical centre, live between different literary and biblical canons? How are (male) subjects bound into performing acts of interpretation, and how might a poetic paragesis help us read otherwise?

Initially I traced how the 'object' of analysis, the biblical text, is always already caught up in circling discourses of authority, rooted in the Enlightenment-Romantic paradigms that I detailed. The deep doubts as to the veracity of biblical documents led to extensive efforts to surround and support them through scholarly apparatus; clearing up errors and corruption would deliver a renewed critical authority to the biblical texts. However, because of the fragmented and obscure nature of textual origins, this type of authoritative discourse continues as an ongoing project to keep producing more and more 'corrected' Bibles.

The 'poetic' Bible aligned biblical authority differently. Through critics and writers such as Robert Lowth and J. G. Herder, certain biblical narratives came to be understood in an extended sense of the 'poetic', appealing to the aesthetic sublime. The literary imagination could perform two distinct but related tasks: on the one hand, it could overcome the clear historical differences between biblical stories and the contemporary *lebenswelt* by emphasizing a shared human subjectivity; on the other, it could instil a sense that true religion was also, at its core, poetic. This view was hugely influential on the Romantic poets that followed Lowth and read their Bibles as practicing a prophetic artistry, 'inspiring' their writing in more ways than one.

I thus argued that the diverse pressures of the Enlightenment-Romantic paradigms produced different types of Bible as different needs were exercised upon the texts. I then traced how these imagined Bibles still operate in the debates and conflicts in (post)modern biblical studies. The emphasis in the second chapter was around how the technologies and 'anguish' of writing are

elided by much biblical scholarship. John Barton's argument that biblical criticism has always been literary allowed me to ask questions as to how much 'literariness' biblical studies could cope with, particularly in light of how literary theory has entered the discourse. This debate was conducted between Michael de Certeau's ideas on the *writing* of history and John Barton's and John J. Collins' deploying of historical difference as an essential guardrail in reading biblical texts correctly. Without collapsing history and literature into a single concept, I drew the two closer by using de Certeau's sense that, within the French *l'écriture*, different significations (chronicle, Scripture, literature) circle and shape one another. I could then make the argument that historical-criticism is actually only made possible through a literary realism tied up with modernist models of autonomy and authority. The conflicts between post-modernism and historical-criticism hinged on this aesthetic-literary bent. John van Seters pondered (disparagingly) whether some postmodernists "who were trained as scholars aspire (perhaps in a way unbeknownst to them) to be novelists, and their work should be viewed, at least in part, in the same way."¹ In a similar way, "since Nietzsche, all philosophers claim to be poets, they all *envy* poets, they are all wishful poets or approximate poets [. . .]."²

This aspiration to the literary in the supposedly more analytical disciplines of philosophy and historical-criticism is telling not least because to write in such a way is deemed beyond the pale of critical discourse. To be labelled poet, novelist, or even simply 'a writer' by one's peers in such Guilds is not to be lavished with praise. However, I argued that with these first two chapters in mind, "[w]e are left with the uncomfortable fact that biblical narrative can . . . *neither* be treated as history *nor* as realistic ('fact-like') fiction" meaning that we might have to "turn again to the concept of the 'poetic.'"³

Having examined some of the constitutions and institutions involved in biblical studies, with a particular focus on the epistemological make-up that exiles the literary and the poetic from the critical centre, I then turned poetry's outsider status to my advantage and began to construct my theory of poetic paragesis which I shall consolidate here. What form could this writing take? How was it imagined to operate? And what are the advantages of such a concept?

1 Seters, "A Response to G. Aichele, P. Miscal and R. Walsh, 'An Elephant in the Room: Historical-Critical and Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible,'" p. 10.

2 Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, p. 70. In Lowe, "Christianity and Anti-Judaism," p. 115.

3 Prickett, *Words and The Word: Language, Poetics and Biblical Interpretation*, p. 203.

The Anatomy of Poetic Paragesis

The poetic paragesis is spun from many different threads. Its location is profoundly significant and affects how it operates. Understanding poetry as a conceptual refugee, foreigner, stranger,⁴ I argued that the 'poetic' outsider exhibits qualities of proximity and distance, indifference and involvement. Thus, the position of the poetic paragesis is to live alongside and within the biblical canon, occupying and writing in the fertile space of the insider/outsider. It insinuates itself as a mobile reading position that feeds from many sources and does not bear "the hallmark of modern critical scholarship . . . one of preserving the integrity of the inside and the outside by ensuring that the one does not contaminate the other."⁵

The question of the inside/outside becomes fundamental to the constitution of the paragetical paradox. As Derrida has often indicated, because of the orientating pull of arche-writing, there is no 'outside-text'; whichever writing is being pursued, "the philosopher, the chronicler, the theoretician in general, and at the limit everyone writing, is . . . taken by surprise [. . .]. In each case, the person writing is inscribed in a determined textual system."⁶ This *surprise* is a "*being held within [prise]*."⁷ As in Jacob's struggle in the *surprise* of the nocturnal attack, the interpreter is held and can only wrest a brief victory by her 'vulgar' supplemental writing on the dimly visible textual event. The paragesis, both in its poetic and 'critical' forms, participates and partakes of the 'scriptural economy', those essential murmurings that produce texts, both the lyric poem and the social strata in which it is read. In my analysis, the particular form of vulgar writing that is the poetic paragesis is written from within the double-canonicities of 'Bible'.

This 'partaking' is significant in terms of how the paragesis enacts and lives on canonical *différance*. Animating the differences between literary and theological canons allowed the poets to bring ('improper') extra-biblical connotations into the semiosphere of the biblical canon [*le propre*]. Writerly border-lines become *shibboleths*. As Derrida highlights, "Shibboleth is . . . a word of *partage*: *partage* as difference, line of demarcation, parting of the waters, scission, caesura, border, dissociation; but also of participation, as that which is divided because it is held in common, by virtue of the partaking of the same."⁸ If poem and biblical text are both host and guest to one another *at the*

4 Simmel, "The Stranger," pp. 402–3.

5 Aichele and Phillips, "Introduction: Exegesis, Eisegesis, Intergesis," p. 14.

6 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 160.

7 Ibid., p. 158.

8 Derrida, "Shibboleth: For Paul Celan," p. 325.

same time, holding the literariness of the texts in common through the double-canoncity inherent in poetic paragesis, then they are both caught in sustaining *and* dismantling one another in hostipitality. This paragetical writing establishes “the boundary itself, the screen which is at once a permeable membrane connecting inside and outside, confusing them with one another, allowing the outside in, making the inside out, dividing them but also forming an ambiguous transition between one and the other.”⁹

As such, with J. Hillis Miller’s work on the Ariadne’s thread of criticism, I emphasized that poetic parageses acknowledge that there can only ever be more writing. Interpretation, as rewriting, while attempting an escape from the labyrinth of text through the right interpretation of *l’écriture*, actually adds more threads to the texture of texts. Both critics and poets are ‘bound to retell’ (*religare/relegere*). Producing commentary on ‘Bible’ means the signifying lines of communication between writers, texts, and readers hum with activity; *différance* ensures that they shall never fall silent, for signs cannot rest within the writing system.

With a narrative such as Gen. 32:22–32 all of these issues were brought to the fore. The poetic paragesis, inspired by such an undecideable text, to which its long reception history testifies, gave me the opportunity to give an account of how poetic writing attempts to respond to the ambiguities of a biblical text and what this might mean for the process of interpretation. Each poem offered different insights into how the poem as paradigmatic paragesis could be enacted.

The poems that I characterized as parageses cited enough of the biblical text to signify that they were setting up home in the double-canoncities of ‘Bible’. If, “in a language, and in the poetic writing of a language, there is nothing but *shibboleth*,”¹⁰ the poems enacted this porous border-making by way of tactically rearranging (*déconstruire*) the linguistic material of Gen. 32:22–32, a text limiting and permissive in the same moment *because* of its double-canoncity. The poem becomes an ‘assemblage’ (or *bricolent* in the sense de Certeau gives the tactic of making-do).¹¹ Rewriting biblical material means that the poem is not rejected by being hosted in the biblical canon; “to avoid the hostility of the host, [the parasite] sometimes copies some of the cells of the surrounding tissue. Thus it minimizes its risks by lightly changing its own body, changing hostility into hospitality, exchanging outside for inside”¹² occurring

9 Miller, “The Critic as Host,” p. 441.

10 Derrida, “Shibboleth: For Paul Celan,” p. 327.

11 De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. xvi.

12 Serres, *The Parasite*, p. 195.

at the “location of contact points with the host’s body.”¹³ The encounter between Jacob and the angel is situated at the shibboleth of the Jabbok, demanding interpretation in a nocturnal contact between bodies that is both wounding and blessing. The encounter between the Bible and the poetic retelling is located at the contact points of literary and theological/biblical canons, stranger/friend, invitation/visitation, hospitality/hostility; in the final analysis, undecidable but far from indifferent.

Paragesis, then, offers an interpretative space between texts, made from within many texts and readings, and living on the lines of communication that bind texts together as intertexts. But it is also *paratextual*, bringing in all that might be outside the formal lines of communication. It acknowledges interpretation as always shifting, equivocal, and noisy. Significations are circling; the decisions of paragetical reading pull them into alignment, if only for as long as the event of a singular reading takes place.

Having explored some of the hybrid (non-)space of the poetic paragesis, I then demonstrated how such creative literary rewriting is especially useful in recasting poetic retelling and biblical criticism as different forms of performance. Because the paragesis, in its enacting of metaphorical language, both borrows from biblical material and renames it, re-constitutes it, Mieke Bal’s concept of a non-indifferent literary intervention takes on new rhetorical potency. As she argues, the literary identity of a retelling “helps the difference between the two canons to keep, so to speak, a foot in the door of the closed religious canons.”¹⁴ Serres also argues that the “parasite comes in with this open-door policy. Its immediate activity is to seek to appropriate for itself what is temporarily in common.”¹⁵ The paragesis, with its roots in the literary even as it also feeds from the work produced in biblical criticism, keeps a foot in the door that allows for other aesthetic-ethical readings to enter. Where biblical criticism has often overlooked the ethical ramifications of its purported disinterested stance towards producing knowledge through biblical commentary, the literary intervention of the poetic paragesis allowed me to ask deeper questions of the performativity of male bodies in the Genesis text. Part of the androcritical project is to recognize the strands that are involved in writing the webs of patriarchal discourse; the different dimensions that enter criticism through the paragesis help read such biblical strands otherwise.

The parageses’ literary genetics meant that I could also use Derek Attridge’s important thinking on the ‘act-event’ to suggest how rewritings “are acts of

13 Ibid., p. 202.

14 Bal, “Religious Canon and Literary Identity,” p. 26.

15 Serres, *The Parasite*, p. 144.

writing that call forth acts of reading.”¹⁶ The “polysemy of the term *act*: as both ‘serious’ performance and ‘staged’ performance, as a ‘proper’ doing and an improper or temporary one, as an action, a law governing actions, and a record documenting actions”¹⁷ highlighted the issues I acknowledged in the event of consigning meaning when poetically rewriting a text through the canonography of the double-canon. Attridge’s work also furnished the poetic paragesis with a deeper understanding of how the literary act of rewriting enacts the alterity, invention, and singularity of responding to biblical texts (keeping a foot in the door) and “stages the knowability—or the unknowability—of the world by staging the processes whereby knowledge is articulated, or whereby its articulation is resisted.”¹⁸ What implications, then, might such a hybrid concept as poetic paragesis hold for biblical studies, the ‘home of searching’ in which it is also firmly planted?

Re-choreographing Biblical Interpretation: Limping or Dancing Away from the Jabbok?

A complex paragetical writing lends itself as an analytical tool to current questions being raised in biblical studies and this is where I want to suggest some future work could be pursued. One of these areas for further research is the increasing and illustrative turn to ‘reception histories’ currently gaining ground in biblical studies.¹⁹

Jonathan Roberts and Christopher Rowland, writing an introduction for a special issue on ‘Reception Histories’ in *The Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, indicate that, within biblical studies, “there has been little discussion of the wider cultural appropriation of the biblical texts in literature and other media.”²⁰ By contrast, in literary or art history studies (to name just two),

16 Attridge, “Introduction: Derrida and the Questioning of Literature,” p. 2.

17 Ibid.

18 Attridge, “Performing Metaphors: The Singularity of Literary Figuration,” pp. 21–22.

19 See, by way of example, the recently published first issue of the journal *Biblical Reception* (edited by J. Cheryl Exum and David J. A. Clines. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2012); the journal *Relegere*, concerned with reception of religious texts outwith the Bible; the Special Issue on Reception in the *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 33(2) 2010; Christopher Rowland, “Re-Imagining Biblical Exegesis,” in Mark Knight and Louise Lee (eds.) *Religion, Literature and the Imagination: Sacred Worlds*, (London: Continuum, 2009) pp. 140–149; the Blackwell *Bible through the Centuries* series; and the massive ongoing 30 volume project of the *Encyclopaedia of the Bible and its Reception* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009–).

20 Jonathan Roberts and Christopher Rowland, “Introduction,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 33, no. 2 (2010): p. 132.

there is a long and vivid history of reading and refiguring 'Bible' that would provide much food for thought for those who have built their expertise on biblical texts. For art historians and literary critics, biblical material has been examined as a source for an artist or writer to manipulate and rework within a given cultural milieu. As such, these reworkings provide significant insights as to the continuing relevance and creative returns that are made to the cultural Bible from a variety of approaches, which, as a nexus of competing discourses, also allows important questions to be raised as to the status of religious texts in contemporary cultures.

As Timothy Beal argues, the turn to 'reception histories' in the historically particular constitution of biblical studies offers a bridge over which we might pass into deeper and wider conversations between the arts and humanities disciplines. Able to mediate between historical and aesthetic approaches,

insisting that it is all effective history [*Wirkungsgeschichte*], always both production and reception, it possesses the welcome potential to overcome the tired, decades-old opposition between so-called historical-critical approaches (source-critical, form-critical, redaction-critical, and textual-critical) and literary-critical approaches (new-critical, reader-response, structuralist, poststructuralist, etc.).²¹

Yet, even with this in mind, there are questions to be asked as to how 'reception history' is constituted and what this means for its use-value. Much of the debate around reception history is marked by biblical studies' particular and constitutional anxieties over the authority of origins.²² Reception history seems to be imagined as a process which can occur once a biblical text has been canonically fixed, the text now in a state which ensures that it is able to be 'received' through the centuries. Broadly speaking, part of the intellectual orientation of historical-critical studies is the attempt to trace a text's genetic inheritance before "the tyranny of canonical assumptions"²³ begins to solidify

21 Beal, "Reception History and Beyond: Toward the Cultural History of Scriptures," p. 364.

22 For an extended study of how some forms of reception history remain attached to an idea of 'the original' whilst avoiding the necessary process of 'the supplemental', especially in relation to poetic retellings of biblical material, see my article "What is Language but a Sound We Christen? Poetic Retellings as an Improper Surprise for Biblical Reception History" in *Biblical Interpretation* (forthcoming May 2014).

23 R. A. Kraft, "Para-mania: Beside, Before and Beyond Bible Studies," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126, no. 1 (Spring 2007): p. 17. Kraft makes the point, often forgotten or elided in reception-histories, that we import modern ideas of what constitutes 'scripture' into our studies of ancient literatures. He introduces the term 'parascriptural' to make sense of material before (antecedent materials), and beside (alternate tellings) the eventually

the ground of subsequent biblical interpretation. Of course, what such work proves is that the further scholars go back, the more apparent the diversity of scriptures, alternative versions, and translations becomes.²⁴ As Beal suggests, this is a major problem for biblical reception-histories that need an 'original' text to proceed:

Where and when is the starting point, when finalization is completed and reception begins? After the early second century, when the latest Christian texts now in the canon were written? In the fourth century, when Athanasius's Easter letter gives the earliest known list of scriptures that matches the canon as we now know it? (Surely Athanasius would not have asserted that list if there had not been other contenders.) After Jerome's Vulgate?²⁵

As I explored in the first two chapters, 'the Bible' is a mobile concept, referring to different material things called Bibles with different canonical and non-canonical contents, but also to the diverse 'ideas' of authority that have surrounded the biblical texts, whether historical, moral, philological, or poetic, or, indeed, a combination of them all. Work in the cultural history of scripture "conceives of biblical texts, the Bible, and the biblical as discursive objects that are continually generated and regenerated within particular cultural contexts in relation to complex genealogies of meaning that are themselves culturally produced."²⁶

canonized material that has come down to us. He also identifies "the 'beyond', the continued development (or metamorphosis) of our identified 'scriptures' into other versions, by way of translation, or expansion and incorporation, or through excerpting and summarizing, and the like," p. 18.

- 24 Brennan Breed makes the important point that it was increasing religious authority (within both post-first century Judaism and Christianities) that began the process of thinking about "biblical texts and variant readings in a new way; the birth of the idea of an authoritative version of a biblical text simultaneously created the concept of variant readings. Thus the change occurred in the *theological* world, not the material world. Of course, the theological shift impacted the material world of biblical manuscripts, as scribal groups attempted to 'correct' texts toward a presumed authentic consonantal text." "Nomadology of the Bible: A Processual Approach to Biblical Reception History," *Biblical Reception* 1 (2012): p. 305.
- 25 Beal, "Reception History and Beyond: Toward the Cultural History of Scriptures," p. 368. Beal also acknowledges that this ideal of finalization is further constrained by assuming that 'the Bible' often refers to a Christian canon of scriptures (p. 368).
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 371.

I have been suggesting that the poetic paragesis is one example of how such genealogies of meaning can be produced, whilst also foregrounding many of the issues that have become part of the process of biblical interpretation. The turn to a cultural history of scripture might then herald new appreciations of how biblical studies itself is part of the 'scriptural economy' that casts the 'mobile Bible' in different roles in contemporary culture and opens up the discipline to the many other voices that speak with and scribble in the margins of the text. This is not to abdicate the responsibilities of critique and simply let many opinions bloom without rejoinder. In a 'scriptural economy' interpretation matters more than ever and becoming more aware of the multiple genealogies of meaning that surround and recite the biblical becomes of paramount importance. This kind of work can shift the intellectual priorities of biblical scholarship from excavating and analysing the 'original' contexts of a biblical motif or story (what Roberts and Rowland call the 'proprietary academic' claims of historical-criticism),²⁷ to charting "a recognition of the dynamic, living relationship between texts and readers, rather than an attempt to isolate and stabilize textual meanings from the mutability of human life."²⁸

Calling Names from Off-Stage

One of the angles of approach that poetic parageses offer for future work is a means of addressing the religious/secular binary both in biblical studies itself, and in wider cultural discourses. Because cultural histories of scripture are "less interested in discovering meaning *in* biblical texts than [...] in how meaning is made *from* biblical texts in different cultural contexts, past and present",²⁹ the emphasis shifts to how biblical material is critically engaged, used and deployed in religious *and* secular thought and practice and, in addition, opens onto larger questions of how this particularly contemporary binary orientates critical and creative work.

Ward Blanton argues that this binary has "emerged into the light of modern cultural perception as the all-encompassing oppositional pair"³⁰ that animates so much of the production of *critical* biblical scholarship. He calls for a biblical scholarship that does not refuse to question the orientating power of these two poles, an "unfinished modern project of biblical studies [that allows] the very difference between religion and its other, 'modern' or critical thought in its

²⁷ Jonathan Roberts and Christopher Rowland, "Introduction," p. 133.

²⁸ Jonathan Roberts, "Introduction," in M. Lieb et al. (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 8.

²⁹ Beal, "Reception History and Beyond: Toward the Cultural History of Scriptures," p. 368.

³⁰ Blanton, "Neither Religious nor Secular: On Saving the Critic in Biblical Criticism," p. 142.

many guises—history, sociology, literature, autonomy, etc.—to fall under the *epoché* of modern critique itself.”³¹ The paragetical writing, always positioned between disciplines and concepts, feeding from this interdisciplinary space, brings these binaries into provocative proximity. It acknowledges that the religious-and-secular actually animate and impinge on one another. The paragesis does not allow for an easy ‘de-scission’ between the two. A poem like Yehuda Amichai’s ‘Jacob and the Angel’ enacts the religious and the secular in the same moment—deciding on which pole most orientates the poem’s production pulls the paragesis up from its extensive roots and kills the writing in an instant. Amichai’s short piece, rather than simply being a secondary part of a ‘Jacob and the Angel through-the-centuries’ trajectory becomes a complex literary performance, participating and contributing to ‘complex genealogies of meaning’ and refusing the hierarchy between exegesis and aesthetic reception and secular or religious ultimacy. The poetic paragesis, as part of a given text’s reception, lives on the lines between the aesthetic and the historical-critical; by enacting both, it brings both into question.

It is interesting to note by way of an example of the orientating power of the conceptual binary of religion-and-secularity, that for scholars such as Jacques Berlinerblau, who see historical-criticism as still in thrall to an implicit or explicit theological underpinning, there is an argument to be made for a ‘secular biblical criticism’ that acknowledges that biblical texts are ‘composition by aggregate’. He argues for

an end to interpretation as typically practiced by biblical scholars. In light of the compositional history (and posthistory) of the Hebrew Bible, there is no compelling reason to believe that we can identify what any given editor or writer wanted to communicate to posterity. Conversely, secular hermeneutics endorses interpretation that self-consciously aspires to achieve the status of a work of art.³²

His subsequent endorsement of a self-consciously aesthetic interpretation of an unintentionally “polysemous text”³³ raises fascinating questions that, paradoxically, spill religion in their wake; what kind of ‘aesthetic’ is thus invoked in the sphere of the secular? As we have explored, the ‘aesthetic’ (often imagined in forms heavily influenced by romanticism and idealism) also has a long and complex relationship with the (religious) metaphysics of representation.

31 Ibid.

32 Berlinerblau, *The Secular Bible: Why Nonbelievers Must Take Religion Seriously*, p. 78.

33 Ibid., p. 141.

With Blanton's questioning of constitutive difference in mind, particularly in how religion-and-secularity is played out within the binds of biblical literatures, the cultural histories of scripture approach takes on even more productive significance in addressing such questions. Indeed, as Blanton suggests, if it is in biblical studies where, like a voice coming 'from above' comes the stage-direction "indicate whether you are doing this . . . religiously or secularly" then our field must be crucial

for the maintenance of the systematic hegemony of this particular quilting point. After all, to say that we feel the pressure to 'confess' our allegiance, to 'fix' ourselves on the territorial maps that emerge under the auspices of this offstage voice, is to say (simultaneously) that we could play a potentially subversive role in unhinging the opposition and thus loosening up for rearticulation that complex network of words and things that have found their pre-scripted places under its imperial banner.³⁴

What theoretical work in 'cultural history' does, taking Blanton and Beal's understanding of the cultural construction of biblical studies seriously, is to ask how guardrails have protected certain types of critical reading and production and which critical moves might now open fuller, more wide-ranging expressions of a given biblical text's career. As Roberts and Rowland suggest, although biblical studies has had a problematic relationship with creative retelling, and these "other appropriations may not flag themselves as explicit interpretations of the Bible [. . .], they nonetheless offer exegetical insights into the interplay of tradition, context and imagination."³⁵ Again, this interplay is what the poetic paragesis performs in its interpretative act-event; the alterity that introduces "into the known . . . that which it excludes in constituting itself as the known,"³⁶ the invention that is "the coming-into-being of the work of art"³⁷ or interpretation, something the writer does and something that *happens* to the writer; and the singularity that "depends on openness to change and porousness in new contexts."³⁸

The cultural history approach, understood in this way, is built on the iterability of biblical texts and thus offers biblical studies more complex choreographies of how Bible lives on in contemporary cultures. As Derrida writes, iterability "structures the mark of writing itself, no matter what particular type

34 Blanton, "Neither Religious nor Secular: On Saving the Critic in Biblical Criticism," p. 154.

35 Roberts and Rowland, "Introduction," p. 132.

36 Attridge, "Performing Metaphors: The Singularity of Literary Figuration," p. 19.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid., pp. 19–20.

of writing is involved.”³⁹ With a more interdisciplinary and nuanced understanding of the afterlives and otherlives of different types of Bible/bibles, we can acknowledge that

iterability alters, contaminating parasitically what it identifies and enables to repeat ‘itself’; it leaves us no choice but to mean (to say) something that is (already, always, also) other than what we mean (to say), to say something other than what we say *and* would have wanted to say, to understand something other than . . . etc.⁴⁰

To follow Berlinerblau and argue that a more aesthetically performative biblical studies is necessarily a more ‘secular’ one makes too quick a connection.⁴¹ Such iterable texts will always mean differently and otherwise which is why they are constantly on the move. The paragesis of biblical texts acknowledges and demands an explanation of how concepts gathered under such terms as secular, religious, aesthetic, ethical, critical and so on, inhere, stabilize and deconstruct one another at the very moment of interpretation. Turning to a cultural history approach at least opens onto this scenario in a more provocative way. As Miller argues, “this complexity and equivocal richness [of writing] . . . resides in part in the fact that there is no conceptual expression without figure, and no intertwining of concept and figure without an implied story, narrative, or myth [. . .]. Deconstruction is an investigation of what is implied by this inherence of figure, concept, and narrative in one another.”⁴²

There is no escape from being ‘bound to retell,’ and different poetic retellings might cause us to dance or limp in equal measure. But by stretching the intertwined paragetical bindings as far as possible, we might read and write Bible in ways that resist simplistic formulations of the ‘religious-and-secular’ and not let the dust thrown up by Jacob and the ‘messenger’ settle either way.

39 Derrida, “Signature Event Context,” p. 7.

40 Derrida, “Limited Inc a b c . . .,” p. 62.

41 For a more extensive exploration of Berlinerblau’s thought on ‘secular biblical criticism’ and its relationship to aesthetic forms of interpretation, see my article “The End of Biblical Interpretation—the Beginning of Reception History? Reading the Bible in the Spaces of Literature,” in *What is Reception History?* Eds. William John Lyons and Emma England (London & New York: Continuum, *forthcoming*).

42 Miller, “The Critic as Host,” p. 443.

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